

CHEW ON THIS

It's a given. We all need fiber. Studies show the typical American eats only about half of the fiber recommended for optimum health. In general, nutritionists recommend we eat 25 to 38 grams of fiber a day, though the ranges for children, adults and seniors vary slightly. To see how you and your family's fiber fitness stacks up, check out this age-specific advice:

KIDS

Eating well-balanced, fiber-rich meals may help children reduce the risk of developing heart disease and some types of cancer later in life. How much fiber is enough for the younger set? Nutrition experts recommend that a child's daily intake of fiber should equal "age + 5 grams" to determine fiber needs for kids between the ages of 3 and 18.¹ For example, a 9-year-old child would need about 14 grams of fiber, 9+5=14.

TIPS

1. Treat kids to the colorful foods they love – make funny-faced sandwiches using pita bread stuffed with their favorite veggies. Use parsley for hair, radishes for eyes and nose, and a slice of red pepper for the mouth.
2. For an extra crunch kids will eat up, make a crunchy crouton-and-vegetable salad. Top a base of broccoli, cauliflower, carrots, celery and cucumbers with whole grain bread crumbs. Whet your kids' appetites for this crunchy creation with their favorite low-fat dressing.
3. Great for tikes on the run, cereal makes a quick take-along snack kids will eat without a fuss. For a "fiberful" sidekick, pack a tasty pear along for the ride.
4. Concoct a low-fat, fiber-topped version of the banana split. Take one scoop of frozen yogurt, add one sliced banana and garnish with strawberries and a sprinkle of crushed cereal.

ADULTS

Fiber is especially important for adults. Choosing foods with soluble fiber, such as white bread, bagels and pasta, may help lower blood cholesterol, while foods with lots of insoluble fiber, whole grains and vegetables, keep your digestive system operating smoothly. Fiber-rich foods can also help control your weight when substituted for high-fat foods.

TIPS

1. Add bite-sized turkey breast pieces, cantaloupe, grapes, low-fat mayonnaise, raisins and a few cashews to whole wheat pasta for a lighter version of a tasty pasta salad. Mixed and chilled, this dish is a winner for lunch or dinner.
2. Serve poultry, fish and meat on a bed of couscous, bulgur or barley. Garnished with sliced oranges, raisins, parsley or a sprinkle of pecans, these tasty sides give you more fiber for your mouthful.
3. Toss broccoli, spinach or peppers into your favorite Oriental noodle recipe or make cold pasta salads with fresh fruits or raw vegetables.
4. Satisfy snack attacks with fresh fruit plus lower-fat crackers, graham crackers or fig bars. You'll get both fiber and energizing complex carbohydrates without a lot of fat. Remember, all foods are part of a balanced diet. Reward yourself with an oatmeal raisin cookie or slice of blueberry pie.

SENIORS

Fiber-minded seniors can put pep in their step by choosing from a variety of fiber-rich foods. To get enough fiber, the National Institute on Aging recommends eating three servings of whole-grain products, three servings of vegetables and two servings of fruit each day. By eating a balanced diet based on the MyPyramid, you won't need fiber supplements.

TIPS

1. Begin your day with a bowl of fruit-topped, whole grain or bran cereal and a slice of toast or a bagel with all-fruit spread.
2. Sneak some fiber into an American favorite. Add whole wheat bread or cracker crumbs, oatmeal, oat bran or crushed bran cereal to your favorite meatloaf recipe.
3. Add barley, beans or crackers to soups or have a whole grain roll or a slice of bread on the side. For something new, make a bread bowl for your next soup-and-salad supper. Scoop out a round loaf of bread and use the insides for dipping into the soup.
4. Drink up. You need plenty of fluids to aid the flow of fiber through your digestive track. Experts recommend getting eight glasses of water each day. That's especially important if you're taking medication, which can sometimes block the movement of fiber through your digestive system.

¹American Academy of Pediatrics: the official, complete home reference guide to your child's nutrition. New York: Villard Books:1999.