

The Importance of Fiber

Fiber or “roughage” as your grandmother may have called it is very important for good health. It has many roles in the body and research has linked it with many positive health outcomes, including:

- Helping to reduce the risk of certain forms of cancer
- Helping to control blood sugar
- Helping to reduce LDL or “bad” cholesterol and other heart risk factors
- Controlling appetite and aiding in weight control

Additionally, and possibly most important for you, is the role that fiber plays in digestion and regularity.

Fiber comes in two forms, soluble and insoluble. Both aid in proper digestion, come from plants so are naturally low in fat and calories and are important for good health. However, depending on the symptoms you may be experiencing, reducing your intake of one form or the other may help you achieve better digestive and elimination health.

Soluble fiber absorbs water in the intestinal track, which helps to *slow down* the amount of time it takes to empty your intestines. These fibers may help you feel full and achieve weight control if that is one of your goals. **These types of fiber are best to consume if you have diarrhea or loose stools.** Examples of foods with high amounts of soluble fiber include:

- Oats, barley and other whole grains (except whole wheat)
- Psyllium laxatives (available over the counter at most pharmacies)
- Sesame seeds
- Fruit, especially bananas, apple *pulp*, citrus, grapes, apricots and cherries
- Vegetables, especially cabbage and carrots

Insoluble fiber is also a good component of a healthy diet, but rather than slowing down digestion, it actually speeds it up and increases the amount and frequency of bowel movements. **These are best to consume if you have problems with constipation or other difficulty with elimination** and, if you have diarrhea, may be best avoided. Good examples include:

- Wheat bran (wheat bran flakes can be purchased at many health food stores or supermarkets and sprinkled on cereals, salads and other foods)
- The edible skins of many fruits including apples, pears and tomatoes
- Bran cereals
- Whole-grain breads (look for “whole grain” in the first 3 ingredients)
- Vegetables like beets, potatoes and corn. Even popcorn counts.

If you currently don’t eat many good sources of fiber, you should gradually increase your intake of fiber to make sure your GI system can handle it. If you drastically change your intake too quickly, you may encounter one of the two elimination problems mentioned above! A good system is to increase your intake of fiber by one serving per day every 4th day until you achieve optimal intake, which is between 20–35 g of fiber each day. Continue to drink plenty of fluids, preferably safe water, to assist with elimination (see Fact Sheet: Water Safety).

The Importance of Fiber *continued*

Fiber Sources

Fruit

Dried fruit, apricots, apples, prunes

Dates

Cooked prunes

Raisins

Vegetables

Baked beans

Corn

Black beans

Split peas

Lentils

Sprouts

Grains

Bulger

Bran

Wheat germ

Whole wheat tortilla

Barley

Pilaf

For bread, muffins, crackers and cereals choose the products that have added bran, are 100% whole wheat and have other added grains to it.

Remember, if you choose to eat dried fruit, be sure to increase the amount of water you drink.