



How to Get More Fiber in Your Diet

“EAT MORE FIBER” This is probably the most common dietary advice given by gastroenterologists. You may have heard that adding high-fiber foods to your diet can keep your digestive system regular. However, fiber can do much more to improve your health, such as lowering blood pressure and cholesterol levels and helping with weight loss.

Understanding Fiber in Your Diet

Fiber is a carbohydrate found mainly in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and legumes (beans and peas). Unlike other carbs, which your digestive system turns into sugar, fiber passes through your body without being broken down. This unique property of fiber means it can aid digestion and provide numerous health benefits without contributing to your calorie intake.

There are two types of fiber:

- **Soluble Fiber:** This type of fiber dissolves in water to form a gel-like substance in your stomach and colon. This gel slows down digestion, helping you feel full longer and preventing overeating. Soluble fiber also helps regulate blood sugar levels by slowing the absorption of sugar into the bloodstream. Additionally, it can lower blood cholesterol by binding with cholesterol particles and removing them from your body. Foods rich in soluble fiber include oats, apples, citrus fruits, carrots, and barley.
- **Insoluble Fiber:** Unlike soluble fiber, insoluble fiber does not dissolve in water. It remains intact as it moves through your digestive system, adding bulk to your stool and helping food pass more quickly through your stomach and intestines. This type of fiber is essential for preventing constipation and maintaining a healthy digestive tract. Foods high in insoluble fiber include whole wheat flour, wheat bran, nuts, beans, and vegetables like cauliflower and potatoes.

How Much Fiber Do You Need?

The amount of fiber you need daily depends on your age and gender. According to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2020–2025, here are the recommendations:

- Men ages 19–50: 31 to 34 grams
- Men over age 50: 28 grams
- Women ages 19–50: 25 to 28 grams
- Women over age 50: 22 grams

The recommendations are slightly higher for pregnant or breastfeeding women to support their additional nutritional needs. Despite these guidelines, most Americans fall short of the recommended fiber intake, consuming only about 15 grams per day on average.

Fiber naturally exists in the plants that we eat. Some manufacturers add it to the food they produce for added health benefits. You can see how much fiber packaged foods contain by reading the Nutrition Facts label, where dietary fiber is listed under Total Carbohydrates.

Benefits of a High-Fiber Diet

Dietary fiber plays an important role in preventing constipation and supporting the movement of food through the body. Fiber adds bulk and absorbs water, making stool softer and easier to pass.

However, the benefits of fiber extend beyond digestive health:

- **Controlling Blood Sugar:** Fiber-rich foods can help manage diabetes by slowing the absorption of sugar and improving blood sugar levels. This effect is particularly beneficial for those with type 2 diabetes, as it helps avoid blood sugar spikes after meals.
- **Protecting Heart Health:** Fiber may protect against heart disease in several ways. It helps reduce blood pressure and inflammation, lowers cholesterol levels, and promotes a healthy weight. Soluble fiber, in particular, binds to cholesterol particles in the digestive system and removes them from the body before they can enter the bloodstream.
- **Helping to Manage Weight:** Because fiber-rich foods are more filling, they can help you eat less and stay satisfied longer. This satiety can prevent overeating and aid in weight management. Additionally, high-fiber foods often require more chewing and take longer to eat, giving your body more time to register that it is full.
- **Reducing Cancer Risk:** While extensive studies have had mixed results about whether a fiber-rich diet reduces the risk of colorectal cancer, the evidence is more robust for whole grains. Increasing consumption of whole grains, which are rich in fiber, is associated with a decreased risk of colorectal cancer. Fiber's role in speeding up the passage of food through the digestive system reduces the amount of time potential carcinogens stay in contact with the intestinal lining.

Which Foods Are High in Fiber?

Fiber supplements are readily available, but getting your fiber from food is best. That's because foods high in fiber also contain vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients your body needs. Here are some excellent sources of dietary fiber:

- **Legumes:** Beans, lentils, and peas are some of the best sources of fiber. They are also protein-rich, making them a great meat substitute for vegetarians and vegans.

- **Fruits:** Many fruits are high in fiber, especially those with edible skins or seeds. Apples, pears, berries, oranges, and bananas are good choices. Dried fruits, such as figs, prunes, and dates, are also excellent sources.
- **Vegetables:** Almost all vegetables contain fiber, but some are particularly high in fiber. Artichokes, Brussels sprouts, broccoli, and carrots are great options. Leafy greens like spinach and kale also provide a good amount of fiber.
- **Whole Grains:** Whole grains contain the entire grain, including the bran, germ, and endosperm, making them fiber-rich. Examples include whole wheat, brown rice, quinoa, barley, bulgur, and oatmeal. In contrast, refined grains, such as white flour and white rice, have been processed to remove the bran and germ, reducing their fiber content.
- **Nuts and Seeds:** Nuts and seeds are a great source of fiber and healthy fats. However, they can be high in calories, so it's best to eat them in moderation. Almonds, chia seeds, flaxseeds, and sunflower seeds are exceptionally high in fiber.

Tips for Increasing Fiber in Your Diet

- **Slice Up Raw Vegetables:** Keep various sliced raw vegetables in your refrigerator for a quick and healthy snack. Carrots, celery, bell peppers, and cucumber slices are all great options.
- **Choose Whole-Grain Cereal or Oatmeal for Breakfast:** Start your day with a high-fiber breakfast. Top your cereal or oatmeal with berries, nuts, or seeds to boost the fiber content even more.
- **Add Fiber-Rich Foods to Your Salad:** Enhance your salads with beans, shredded carrots, and a sprinkling of nuts or seeds. This adds texture and flavor while increasing the fiber content.
- **Include Fruits and Vegetables in Every Meal:** Make it a habit to include at least one fruit or vegetable in every meal. This can be as simple as adding a side of steamed vegetables to your dinner or having an apple with your lunch.
- **Switch to Whole Grains:** Replace refined grains with whole grains. For example, brown rice should be used instead of white rice, whole-grain bread should be used instead of white bread, and whole-wheat pasta should be used instead of regular pasta.
- **Eat Fiber-Rich Foods with Each Meal:** Aim to include fiber-rich foods in all your meals. This consistent intake helps you meet your daily fiber needs more efficiently.

Managing the Transition to a High-Fiber Diet

Adding fiber to your diet too quickly can cause digestive side effects like bloating and constipation. To avoid these issues, increase your fiber intake gradually over a few weeks. This allows your digestive system to adjust to the change. Drinking plenty of water is also crucial, as it helps fiber move through your digestive system more smoothly.

Fiber Content (grams) of Common Foods

Basically, the term fiber refers to carbohydrates that cannot be digested. Fiber is present in all plants that are eaten for food, including fruits, vegetables, grains, and legumes. Looking to add more fiber to your diet? Fiber — along with adequate fluid intake — moves quickly and relatively easily through your digestive tract and helps it function properly. A high-fiber diet may also help reduce the risk of obesity, heart disease and diabetes.

Almonds slivered 1 tbsp 0.6 sliced 1/4 cup 2.4	Carrots raw, slivered (5 sticks) 4 1.7 cooked 1/2 cup 3.4	Greens, cooked 1/2 cup 20 collards, beet greens, dandelion, kale, Swiss chard	Potatoes Idaho, baked 1 sm (6 oz) 4.2 mashed potato (with 1/2 cup milk) 5 sweet: baked 1 sm (5 oz) 4
Apple raw 1 small 3 raw 1 med 4 raw 1 large 4.5 applesauce 2/3 cup 3.6	Cauliflower raw, chopped 3 tiny buds 1.2 cooked, chopped 7/8 cup 2.3	Lentils brown, raw 1/3 cup 5.5 brown, cooked 2/3 cup 5.5 red, raw 1/2 cup 6.4 red, cooked 1 cup 6.4	Prunes pitted 3 1.9
Apricots raw 1 whole 0.8 dried 2 halves 1.7 canned in syrup 3 halves 2.5	Celery raw 1/4 cup 2 chopped 2 tbsp 1 cooked 1/2 cup 3	Lettuce (Boston, leaf, iceberg) shredded 1 cup 0.8	Radishes 3 5
Artichokes cooked 1 large 4.5 canned hearts 4 or 5 sm 4.5	Cereal All-Bran 3 tbsp 5 Bran Buds 3 tbsp 5 Bran Chex 2/3 cup 5 Bran Flakes, plain 1 cup 5 with raisins 1 cup 6 Cornflakes 3/4 cup 2.6 Cracklin' Bran 1/2 cup 4 oatmeal 3/4 cup 7.7 Nabisco 100% Bran 1/2 cup 4 Puffed wheat 1 cup 3.3 Raisin Bran 1 cup 5 Wheaties 1 cup 2	Macaroni whole wheat, cooked 1 cup 5.7 regular baked 10 oz 2.2	Raspberries, red fresh/frozen 1/2 cup 4.6 Raspberry jam 1 tbsp 1
Asparagus cooked, small spears 1/2 cup 1.7	Cherries sweet, raw 10 1.2 sweet, raw 1/2 cup 1.0*	Muffins English, whole wheat 1 whole 3.7 Bran, whole wheat 2 4.6	Rice white 1/2 cup 2 brown 1/2 cup 5.5 instant 1 serv 0.7
Avocado diced 1/4 cup 1.7 sliced 2 slices 0.9 whole 1/2 avg. size 2.8	Chickpeas (garbanzos) canned 1/2 cup 6 cooked 1 cup 12	Mushrooms raw 5 sm 1.4 sautéed or baked 4 lg 2 canned sliced 1/4 cup 2	Sauerkraut canned 2/3 cup 3.1
Baked beans in sauce (8-oz can) 1 cup 16	Corn (sweet) on cob 1 med ear 5 kernels 1/2 cup 5 cream-style, canned 1/2 cup 5 succotash 1/2 cup 6	Noodles whole wheat egg 1 cup 5.7 spinach whole wheat 1 cup 6	Shredded wheat large biscuit 1 piece 2.2 spoon size 1 cup 4.4
Banana whole 1 med 8" 3	Crackers graham 2 1.4 Ry-Krisp 3 2.3 Triscuits 2 2 Wheat Thins 6 2.2	Onion raw 1 tbsp 0.2 cooked 1/2 cup 1.5 instant minced 1 tbsp 0.3 green, raw (scallion) 1/4 cup 0.8	Spaghetti whole wheat, plain 1 cup 5.6 with meat sauce 1 cup 5.6 with tomato sauce 1 cup 6
Beans black, cooked 1 cup 19.4 Great Northern 1 cup 16 kidney beans, canned or 1/2 cup 9.7 cooked 1 cup 19.4	Cucumber, raw unpeeled 10 thin slices 0.7	Orange 1 lg 7.0 1 sm 3.5	Squash summer (yellow) 1/2 cup 2 winter 1/2 cup 3.5
Beets cooked, sliced 1/2 cup 2.5 whole 3 sm. 3.7	Dates, pitted 2 3.9	Peach raw 1 med 2.3 canned in light syrup 2 halves 1.4	Zucchini raw or cooked 1/2 cup 3
Blackberries raw, no sugar 1/2 cup 4.4 canned, in juice pack 1/2 cup 5 jam, with seeds 1 tbsp 0.7	Eggplant baked with tomatoes 2 thick slices 4	Peanut butter 1 tbsp 8.6	Strawberries 1 cup 3
Bread Boston brown 2 slices 4.0 cracked wheat 2 slices 3.6 high-bran bread 2 slices 7.0 white 2 slices 1.9 dark rye (whole grain 2 slices) 5.8	Endive, raw salad 10 leaves 0.6	Peanuts dry roasted 1 tbsp 1.1	Sunflower kernels 1 tbsp 0.5 Sweet pickle relish 1 tbsp 0.5
pumpnickel 2 slices 4 seven-grain 2 slices 6.5 whole wheat 2 slices 6 whole wheat raisin 2 slices 6.5	Figs dried 3 10.5 fresh 1 2	Pear 1 med 8.8	Tomatoes raw 1 sm. 1.4 canned 1/2 cup 1 sauce 1/2 cup 0.5
Broccoli raw 1/2 cup 4 frozen 4 spears 5 fresh, cooked 3/4 cup 7	Grapefruit 1/2 3	Peas green, fresh or frozen 1/2 cup 9.1 black-eyed 1/2 cup 8 split peas, dried 1/2 cup 6.7 cooked 1 cup 13.4	Walnuts shelled, chopped 1 tbsp 1.1
Brussel sprouts cooked 3/4 cup 3 1 cup 9.6	Grapes white 20 1 red or black 15-20 1	Peas and carrots frozen 1/2 pkg(5 oz) 6	Watermelon 1 thick slice 6.8
Cabbage, white or red raw 1/2 cup 1.5 cooked 2/3 cup 3	Green (snap) beans fresh or frozen 1/2 cup 2.1	Peppers green sweet, raw 2 tbsp 0.3 green sweet, cooked 1/2 cup 1.2 red sweet (pimento) 2 tbsp 1 red chili, fresh 1 tbsp 1.2 dried, crushed 1 tsp 1.2	Yams (orange fleshed sweet potato) cooked or baked 1 med (6oz) 6.8