

Dietary Fiber ... FAQ

What is fiber?

The word "fiber" refers to a certain type of food product or supplement that has beneficial properties. Fibers can retain water, forming a jelly-like mass. Fiber increases the frequency and weight of stool because of this water-retaining ability. When the water-fiber mixture moves through the gastrointestinal (GI) tract, it helps fecal material become more liquid and easy to pass, in contrast to the dry, hard stools that are difficult to evacuate.

How much fiber do you need?

The average American only takes in 19-20 grams of fiber daily. Current recommendations call for 30-60 grams daily.

Can I get enough fiber from fruits and vegetables?

The short answer is "Not usually". Many people think that simply eating salads gives adequate fiber to promote healthy bowel movements. However, lettuce (commonly referred to as "roughage") only contains about 1/2 gram of fiber per cup. It would be almost impossible to eat the 60-120 cups of lettuce daily to meet recommended fiber requirements.

Other vegetables are higher in fiber. The number of grams of fiber per cup for several is:

- zucchini (2.52)
- spinach (4.14)
- broccoli (5.16)
- baked squash (5.74)
- baked potatoes with skin (5.94)
- corn (6.06)
- green peas (6.72).

To eat 30-60 grams of fiber daily using any of these vegetables would require more cups than most people could manage. Fruits range from mediocre to fairly decent fiber sources. For example, grapes contain only 1.12 grams of fiber per cup.

Of the common non-berry fruits, the number of grams of fiber per cup is as follows:

- watermelon (1.3)
- bananas (2.19)
- apples with peels (2.76)
- oranges (3.14).

Berries are higher because of skins and seeds, with each cup of blackberries and boysenberries containing 7.2 grams of fiber, and raspberries containing 7.5 grams. Canned prunes contain 13.76 grams per cup. While fruits are more attractive to most people than vegetables, it would still be difficult to eat one's daily fiber amount using fruits alone. Even combining fruits and vegetables together would still cause most people to fall short of their daily fiber recommendations.

Are there other good dietary fiber sources?

According to the Food Guide Pyramid developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, people should ingest 3 ounces or more of whole grains daily. This includes breads, crackers, rice, cereal or pasta produced from whole grains. However, few Americans meet their fiber intake recommendations through dietary means alone.

Are there good fiber supplements?

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is the governmental agency responsible for deciding which fiber supplements are safe and effective enough for self-use. This list includes psyllium, bran, calcium polycarbophil, malt soup extract, karaya, and methylcellulose. Each can help promote normal bowel movements in the same manner as dietary fiber.

Excerpts from:

Successfully Changing from Stimulant Laxatives to Healthy Regularity

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