

Natural Health News

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THE ANTI-AGING BENEFITS OF FIBER

Fiber not only keeps the digestive system in good working order but it is also a major player in so many of your body's systems that getting enough can actually help keep you youthful. According to a recent study, older people who ate a fiber-rich diet were 80 percent more likely to live longer and stay healthier than those who didn't. The trouble is, few Americans consume the amount they should. It is estimated that the average American consumes about half of the required amount of dietary fiber each day. High-fiber foods are important because they help guard against cancer, heart disease, diverticulosis, kidney stones, PMS, obesity and help support a healthy digestive tract. Fiber is a carbohydrate found in plant foods: beans, fruits, grains, nuts and vegetables. Technically, it is not a nutrient because it is not broken down and absorbed. But that's what makes it so beneficial. Due to its structure and our inability to absorb it, fiber passes through our digestive system unabsorbed by digestive enzymes within the stomach, carrying toxins, waste, fat and cholesterol particles out of the gut. In the process, it helps improve our heart health, makes us feel full, and helps with digestion and detoxification. There are several types of fiber, but they all fall into two categories: soluble and insoluble. We need both kinds, which are present in almost all whole foods that are carbohydrates. Soluble fiber slows down digestion by attracting water and forming a gel-like substance once digested. This kind of fiber is found in foods like oats or oat bran, nuts, flaxseeds, beans, lentils, peas, and some fruits and vegetables like berries and carrots. Soluble fiber is the type that helps with weight loss because it slows the process of food emptying from your stomach and makes you feel full for longer after eating. It also bulks up your stool, making it easier to pass. Insoluble fiber is found in whole grains, vegetables, and fruit skin. This kind of fiber promotes contractions of the digestive tract that move food and waste through the body. Insoluble fiber is found in many whole grains like brown rice, barley and bulgur, plus most vegetables, including root vegetables, broccoli, cucumbers, carrots, green beans and zucchini. Many plant foods contain both, so by eating a variety, you will cover all your bases. While both types of fiber have their roles in digestion, insoluble fiber is especially important since it provides bulk to the stool and helps speed up waste removal in the digestive tract, which prevents constipation, bloating and indigestion. Soluble fiber absorbs water to become a gelatinous substance and is fermented by bacteria in the digestive tract, which also improves digestion. Fiber needs to absorb water to have these effects, so when you begin eating a high-fiber diet, drink plenty of fluids throughout the day for the best digestive relief. Soluble fiber binds to bile acids, substances produced by the liver that aid in digestion and fat absorption, and it helps your body excrete them. In return, the body needs to produce more bile acids and it is able to pull cholesterol from the blood to do it. A study published in 2009 found that people who got less than 20 grams of fiber per day had about a 50 percent greater risk of developing type 2 diabetes than those who got 31 grams or more per day. Fiber slows the absorption of carbohydrates into your bloodstream, blood sugar levels rise more slowly and the pancreas has more time to react and produce insulin. Fiber doesn't digest, it ferments. By the time it reaches the colon, the fermented material supplies food to help those good bacteria multiply and thrive. A healthy supply of good bacteria can have numerous beneficial health effects, such as strengthening the immune system and helping to control inflammation. Chronic inflammation has been linked to many diseases, such as arthritis, cancer, and even Alzheimer's. Many studies have shown that increased soluble fiber intake leads to reduced inflammation.

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If fiber can reduce inflammation, it stands to reason that it may help reduce the risk of arthritis and protect your joints. A recent study, published in the *Annals of the Rheumatic Disease*, offers some proof. Researchers evaluated two groups of people and found that in one group, those whose daily fiber intake averaged 20 grams had a 30 percent lower risk of knee osteoarthritis than people who ate about 8 grams. In another study group, those who averaged about 25 grams of fiber per day had a 61 percent lower risk compared with those who consumed about 14 grams. Another study followed over 1,600 healthy adults for 10 years. Those who had “aged successfully” after a decade (meaning they were free of cancer, heart disease, and diabetes, and had good overall cognitive, physical, and cardiovascular function) consumed an average of 29 grams of fiber per day. Research shows there is an inverse association between insoluble fiber intake and systolic and diastolic blood pressure, total cholesterol levels and triglycerides. In addition, soluble fiber also helps lower LDL (bad) blood cholesterol by interfering with the absorption of dietary cholesterol. According to studies, the more pronounced the high-fiber diet, essentially the less likely that person is to experience hypertension and other risk factors of heart disease and metabolic syndrome. Historically, because the Mediterranean diet is naturally a high-fiber diet due to a high consumption of vegetables, fruits, beans and whole grains, this population has been at a much lower risk for heart disease than many Americans today. Also, numerous studies reveal that a high-fiber diet helps prevent obesity. If your goal is to reduce your weight, fiber can help since it makes you feel fuller after eating and can prevent snacking or overeating at your next meal. Results from studies show that the addition of a high-fiber diet generally decreases food intake overall, and, therefore, over time can contribute to a lower body weight. But there are also other benefits of fiber for weight loss, such as decreasing absorption of toxins and altering secretion of gut hormones. A high-fiber diet helps prevent digestive disorders, inflammatory bowel diseases and colon cancer. This is because prebiotic fiber helps improve immune function and maintains better colon and intestinal health, while also clearing away harmful waste from the digestive organs. Many processed foods, including cereal and breads, have added fiber. However, these added sources of fiber are not the healthiest. You are not going to get the same health benefits from eating highly processed foods with a sprinkling of added fiber. Beta glucan, cellulose, chicory root, inulin, pectin, psyllium, and xanthan gum are types of fiber that are added to some packaged foods. The Food and Drug Administration is reviewing some of those ingredients to determine whether to allow manufacturers to continue to count them as part of a product’s total fiber content. The advantage of adding fiber into foods is to increase fiber without increasing calories. However, this practice may make junk food appear to be healthy because the label touts its fiber content.

Foods that are naturally high in fiber are some of the healthiest foods. Some of the foods highest in fiber include avocado, berries, Asian pears, coconut, figs, artichokes, peas, beans, brussels sprouts, sweet potatoes, chickpeas, lentils, nuts, flaxseeds, chia seeds, bulgur and quinoa. Start eating high-fiber foods by swapping out meat for beans a couple times a week. Plant-based protein from beans also provides minerals and lots of fiber. Eating whole pieces of fruit and vegetables gives you the most fiber. Always skip products made with refined flours or grains. Only eat 100 percent whole grains that have their natural bran and germ intact. Snack on raw vegetables and hummus or whole pieces of fruit throughout the day instead of having processed foods fortified with fiber. Eat a large salad once a day, and add plenty of vegetables, beans, legumes, nuts and seeds. Make a smoothie instead of having a juice, so you can include all of the fruit and vegetable pulp, seeds and skin where the fiber is stored.

High-fiber Breakfast Smoothie

Place the following ingredients in a high-speed blender: 2 cups purified water, 1 scoop vanilla protein powder, 1 heaping TBSP. psyllium husk fiber, 1/2 frozen banana, 1/3 cup frozen blueberries, 1 heaping TBSP. chia seeds and a few ice cubes. Blend until smooth—enjoy!

“The really important thing is not to live, but to live well.”

~Socrates

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