

“Rambling on with Kathleen”

What’s Up with Fiber?

We have heard more about fiber in the past several decades from doctors, nurses, nutritionists and even through the media. It seems that physicians are noting that fiber affects bowel movements and thus a person’s health or illness. But what exactly is it and how does it help us?

Fiber is a key element needed for the digestive tract and is an essential part of everyone’s diet. Fibers are foods that will not break down in chemical digestion. They add bulk to the diet therefore producing *bulkier* bowel movements. Fiber in the diet is thought to benefit the intestinal tract and overall health such as aiding in constipation, decreasing blood sugar and even maintaining or shedding the weight.

There are soluble and insoluble fibers. Soluble fibers will dissolve in water while insoluble cannot dissolve in water.

Insoluble fibers are whole grains veggies, some fruits and bran. As they move through the intestine, they soak up the water like a sponge and this helps to clean the intestine out. Cellulose is an insoluble form of fiber. Cellulose is found in the peels of fruits and veggies and helps to absorb then remove toxins and prevent hemorrhoids and constipation.

Soluble fibers are oats legumes and fruits such as apples, pears, prunes. When these fibers dissolve, a gel like substance is formed coating the wall of the intestine.

Neither types of fibers are absorbed by the intestine but as noted above, they improve digestive function and thus overall health.

Diets that include fiber will aide in constipation. Using both soluble and insoluble fibers will alleviate constipation better then over the counter supplements which usually only include soluble fibers. One must also have adequate fluid intake when taking high amounts of fiber for constipation otherwise more problems can arise.

According to some, increasing fiber intake may also take off some pounds. It is thought that perhaps the soluble fibers that form the gel like substance will cause slower movement through the intestine. Thus, a person may feel full and less hungry for longer periods. Some also believe higher fiber may in fact decrease the number of calories that are absorbed from the intestine.

As soluble fibers form the gel like substance that coats the wall of the intestine, it also supposedly soaks up the cholesterol. So, fibers are also thought to lower cholesterol.

High fiber diets can also aide in blood sugar control. “Soluble fiber has been found to produce significant reductions in blood sugar in 33 of 50 studies testing it”.
(medicinenet.com)

So, when choosing foods, be sure to check the label for fiber intake. The total fiber intake will include all fibers within the food or item and this is what you can monitor. Total fiber intakes recommended will differ for men and women. For example, recommended for a woman between the age of 31 and 50 may be 25 g/d but a man would be higher at approximately 38 g/d.

If you wish to increase your fiber for health benefits:

- Increase slowly – if you increase too quickly you may experience gas or other problems
- Always check with your physician to be certain there is no contraindication for you to increase fiber (some health problems may be an issue or reason to avoid high fiber intake)
- Monitor your bowel movements and note any changes in consistency, frequency etc. – Again, check with your physician and inform him of any problems
- Read food labels
- Keep items around the house and available as snacks that are good fiber sources such as cut up veggies, cereals, fruits.
- If you are using fruit as a fiber source be sure to wash the fruit if you plan to eat the peels
- Add items high in fiber to your regular food to increase the intake – nuts to salad, fresh fruit to your cereal etc.
- Listen to your body! Don't focus too much on counting the numbers. Go by how you are feeling and your bowel movements.
- Be sure to drink plenty of healthy fluids such as water with fiber intake.
- If you experience severe or ongoing diarrhea or constipation seek medical advice immediately.

For more information on this topic speak to your health care provider or visit Kathleen at the Outlook.

Resources: Personal and Professional experience, Internet, medicinenet.com, vital nutrients, americanheart.org, medlineplus, other

Wellness Webpage by Kathleen Dunkelberger Nursing Consulting Services, LLC

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