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Getting Enough Fiber In Our Diets

Research has found that only 23% of us are eating the recommended minimum of five servings of fruits and vegetables a day. This isn't a good thing! Besides providing a variety of tastes and textures to our meals, fruits and vegetables provide fiber, vitamins and minerals. Whole grain bread and cereal products also provide fiber. Fiber has many functions in promoting good health.

There are two main kinds of fiber and they serve different functions. Soluble fiber is good for people with diabetes, it's helpful for weight control and helps lower blood cholesterol. The best sources of soluble fiber are vegetables such as cabbage and carrots, oats and barley, beans and peas and fruits such as apricots, apples, citrus and strawberries.

The insoluble fibers are cellulose and it speeds the transit of food through the system. This helps prevent constipation and other digestive disorders. The best sources of cellulose are whole wheat, bran and vegetables and fruit.

Higher fiber foods are usually low in calories and help in weight control. Being overweight has been found to be an important risk factor for several kinds of cancer: colorectal, esophageal, gallbladder, kidney, pancreatic and uterine cancers. Avoiding a high fat diet and eating more fruits and vegetables are recommended for all these.

Several diets (including the DASH diet - the Dietary Approach To Stop Hypertension) recommend more than five servings a day of fruits and vegetables. The five-a-day promotion is for us to have a total of five servings - combining our servings of fruits and vegetables. We would be healthier if we could consumer five servings of both fruits and vegetables every day.

Here are some tips for increasing the fiber content in our diets:

- Eat beans more often. They are one of our very best sources of fiber. There are many varieties of beans and, of course, the ones with tougher skins like lima beans have more fiber than snap beans. You can buy fresh, canned or dried beans. It's easy to cook up a package of dried beans and freeze them in usable quantities. Explore new ways to serve them. Black beans with rice has become popular lately. If gas is a problem there are products on the market to deal with it.
- When buying bread, instead of going by the name of the bread, look at the list of ingredients. Whole grain or whole wheat flour is a much better source of fiber than white flour. One hundred percent whole wheat or one hundred percent whole grain flour

should be listed as the first ingredient in the ingredients list. Or look at the nutrition label, bread should provide two or preferably three grams of fiber per slice.

- Eat oats more often in the form of oatmeal for breakfast, oatmeal cookies, oat breads and oats added to burger and meatloaf mixtures. Old fashioned, quick-cooking and instant oatmeal are all made from the same kind of oats, just cut up finer to cook faster. The instant oatmeals will have salt and flavorings added. Oat bran is higher in fiber than oatmeal. Oat bran and wheat germ can be added to bread ingredients to increase fiber content.
- Opt for brown rice rather than white rice. It has five times more fiber.
- Eat the skins of potatoes and other fruits and vegetables. Sweet potatoes, even without eating the skin, have as much fiber as potatoes with the skin.
- Look for crackers with at least two grams of fiber per ounce.
- Cooked tomatoes and tomato sauce contain the carotenoid lycopene that appear to help prevent prostate cancer. Cooked and processed tomatoes have two to ten times more lycopene than raw tomatoes. Cooked carrots also have more lycopene than raw carrots.
- Snack on dried fruit, such as apricots, raisins, dried cherries and dried plums. They are great sources of fiber but eat them in moderation, they do contain sugar. Ten dried apricot halves have the same calories as a medium apple.
- Barley is a good source of soluble fiber but the pearl barley that is in supermarkets has had the outer husk and bran layer removed. You can get hulled barley in health food stores, it is a better source of fiber than pearl barley. It can be used in place of rice in pilafs and risottos, to make a hot breakfast cereal, for stuffing cabbage rolls or bell peppers, or tossed with sliced mushrooms, chopped tomatoes or slivered bell peppers and a little oil and vinegar for a salad. You can add cooked turkey or tuna, if you like.
- Instead of drinking fruit juice, eat the fruit - and the skin when you can. Berries where you eat the seeds like strawberries, raspberries/blackberries and blueberries are good sources of fiber.

Don't avoid fiber because you think it will cause bloating, gas and other problems. If you are increasing your fiber, do it gradually so the body can adjust and be sure to drink plenty of liquids.

It's worth our effort to include more fruits and vegetables in our diets. It's lots better for us than the high fat foods so many people have made an important part of their diets. The low carbohydrate diets have major restrictions on fruits and vegetables, whole grains, legumes and low-fat dairy foods. This contradicts everything we know about health promotion and disease prevention. Just like any diet where you restrict foods, when they go off the diet and eat "regular" foods again, the weight will come back. It's smarter to change your diet permanently to eat healthier foods.