

# Are you getting enough fiber?

Usually, ingredients in foods that are good for you are absorbed and used by your body to function properly and keep you healthy. Fiber, an important part of a healthy diet, is different. Although fiber is not absorbed and passes through the digestive system largely intact, it is a very important part of good digestive health and protects against other serious diseases, such as heart disease and cancer.

Fiber is found only in plant foods, such as whole grains, fruits,

vegetables, beans, nuts, and seeds.

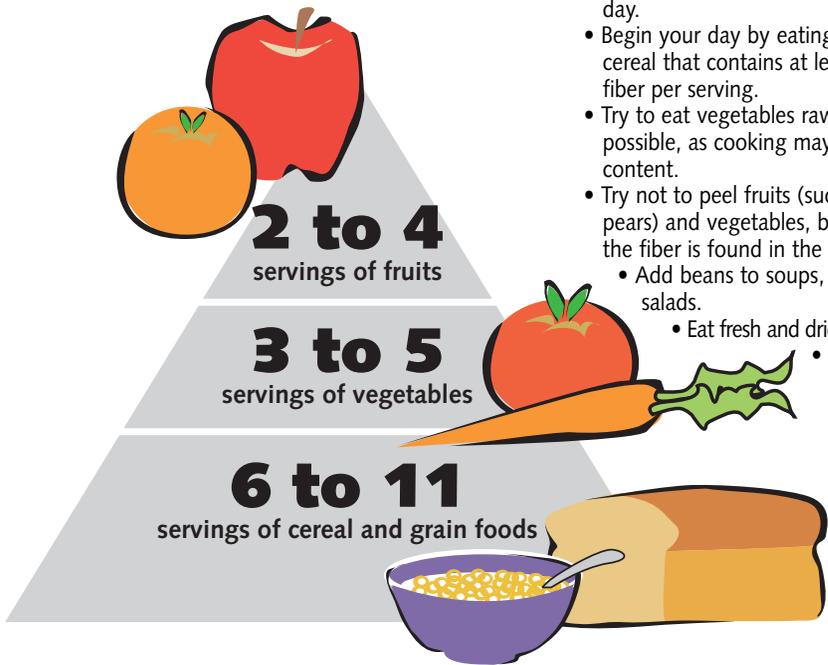
Researchers writing in the June 2, 1999, issue of JAMA report that women who eat a diet high in fiber have reduced risk of heart disease. The study tracked more than 68,000 women over 10 years and confirms the protective effects of fiber against heart disease that previous studies have found in men. Among the different sources of fiber, the study found that fiber found in cereals was especially associated with reduced risk of heart disease.

## WHAT IS FIBER?

Fiber is the components of plants (such as fruits, vegetables, and grains) that the body does not digest. There are 2 types of dietary fiber – **soluble**, which forms a gel when mixed with liquid, and **insoluble**, which does not.

## HOW TO EAT MORE FIBER:

- To get adequate fiber in your diet, follow the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Guide Pyramid, which recommends eating 2 to 4 servings of fruit, 3 to 5 servings of vegetables, and 6 to 11 servings of cereal and grain foods each day.
- Begin your day by eating a whole-grain cereal that contains at least 5 grams of fiber per serving.
- Try to eat vegetables raw as much as possible, as cooking may reduce fiber content.
- Try not to peel fruits (such as apples and pears) and vegetables, because much of the fiber is found in the skin.
  - Add beans to soups, stews, and salads.
  - Eat fresh and dried fruits as snacks.
- Read food labels for fiber content.



## HOW MUCH DO YOU NEED?

The recommended daily intake of fiber is 20 to 35 grams each day. As examples, a 1/2-cup serving of bran flake cereal has 5.5 grams and an unpeeled pear has 4.5 grams of fiber. As much as possible, this amount should come from foods high in fiber, rather than supplements.

## WHAT DOES IT DO?

Both soluble and insoluble fiber are an important part of a healthy diet because they aid normal bowel function and help maintain regularity. In addition, soluble fiber, when part of a diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol, has been associated with a reduced risk of certain cancers, diabetes, digestive disorders, and heart disease. Foods high in soluble fiber include oat bran, oatmeal, beans, peas, rice bran, barley, and citrus fruits. Foods high in insoluble fiber include whole-wheat breads, wheat cereals, wheat bran, rye, whole-grain rice, barley, cabbage, carrots, and Brussels sprouts.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- American Dietetic Association Consumer Nutrition Hot Line 800/366-1655 or [www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org)
- American Heart Association 800/AHA-USA1 or [www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org)
- U.S. Department of Agriculture Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion *Food Guide Pyramid* 800/687-2258 or [www.usda.gov/cnpp](http://www.usda.gov/cnpp)

## INFORM YOURSELF:

To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, check out the AMA's Web site at [www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm](http://www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm).

Additional Sources: National Cancer Institute, American Dietetic Association, Food and Drug Administration, AMA's Encyclopedia of Medicine

Mi Young Hwang, Writer  
 Richard M. Glass, MD, Editor  
 Jeff Molter, Director of Science News

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