

UNIVERSITY HEALTH CENTER
University of Maryland, College Park

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A HIGH FIBER DIET

What is fiber? Why do I need it?

Fiber is an indigestible material produced by plants. Because it is not digested, it passes through our body almost unchanged. It helps keep the muscles of our digestive system toned and healthy, much as exercise keeps our other muscles healthy and strong. High fiber diets have also been linked to lower levels of cholesterol and colon cancer and may help diabetics control blood sugar.

The digestive system also needs plenty of water in order to work properly. In addition to consuming a high-fiber diet, be sure to drink at least 8 cups of fluids a day (more if your body needs it).

What foods contain fiber?

Only plants produce fiber. No matter how ‘crunchy’ or how ‘tough’ animal products may be, they do not contain fiber. Even bones and eggshells contain no fiber. Whole grains, peas, beans, and some fruits and vegetables are good sources of fiber.

When foods are processed, fiber is often removed. The more refined and processed your overall diet, the less fiber you are probably consuming.

Foods made from white flour (bleached or unbleached) are poor sources of fiber; this includes white breads and pizza crusts, and regular pasta and noodles.

Fruit and vegetable juices usually contain practically no fiber, because the juice has been squeezed out of the plant material and the fiber is left behind with the “solids”.

On the other hand, drying, freezing and normal cooking do not change the fiber content of most foods significantly. Have your beans and peas whichever way you enjoy them; eat your broccoli, cabbage, carrots and cauliflower raw or cooked. Dried, frozen or canned fruit (preferably with no added sugar) will do, if fresh is not convenient.

How much fiber do I need?

Current recommendations are for a fiber intake of 20 to 35 grams per day. The average age American consumes 14-15 grams per day – well below the current recommendation.

A sudden increase in fiber can cause bloating with gas or diarrhea and cramping – it is a good idea to increase your intake gradually, over a period of weeks while simultaneously increasing fluids.

Check the following list for the approximate fiber content of some popular foods. Different sources of information sometimes disagree on the precise fiber content of foods. All agree that beans, peas, lentils and 100% whole wheat are very good sources of fiber.

APPROXIMATE FIBER CONTENT OF POPULAR FOODS

Food	Amount	Grams of Fiber	Calories
<i>Really Good Sources:</i>			
All-Bran cereal	1/3 cup	8.5	71
Bran Buds cereal	1/3 cup	7.9	73
Bran Chex cereal	2/3 cup	4.6	91
Corn Bran cereal	2/3 cup	5.4	98
Raisin Bran cereal	3/4 cup	4.0	115
Grape Nuts cereal	1/2 cup	3.6	208
Pear, with skin	1 medium	4.0	100
Baked beans	1/2 cup	8.8	155
Kidney beans, cooked	1/2 cup	7.3	110
Popcorn	4 cups	4.0	220
Veggie burger	1 patty	4.0	100
Whole wheat pasta	2 oz. dry	9.0	200
 <i>Pretty Good Sources:</i>			
Apple, with skin	1 medium	3.5	80
Banana	1 medium	2.4	105
Prunes	3	3.0	60
Raisins	1/4 cup	3.1	108
Strawberries, raw	1 cup	3.0	45
Orange	1 medium	2.6	62
Broccoli, cooked	1/2 cup	2.2	20
Corn, whole kernel canned	1/2 cup	2.9	87
Carrots	1/2 cup	2.3	24
Green beans, frozen	1/2 cup	2.2	25
Peas, canned/frozen	1/2 cup	3.3	60
Potato, with skin	1 medium	2.5	106
Sweet potato	1 medium	3.4	160
Chick peas	1/2 cup	2.8	135
Whole wheat bread	2 slices	2.6	122
Shredded wheat	2/3 cup	2.6	102
Triscuit crackers	7 crackers	4.0	140
 <i>Not-so-great Sources:</i>			
Pineapple, canned	1 cup	1.9	150
Cheerios	1 1/4 cup	1.1	111
Cauliflower	1/2 cup	1.0	12
Tomato	1 medium	1.5	20

Poor Sources:

Celery, cucumber, lettuce, mushrooms, onion, fruit juices, vegetable juices, rice, corn flakes, refined white flour products (like white breads, rolls and bagels, most pastas, pizza crust and crackers)