



Fibre & Bowel Health

Dietary fibre is necessary for good digestion and a healthy bowel. It also helps control weight, blood cholesterol level and blood sugar level and may protect against bowel cancer. Good sources of dietary fibre include whole-grain breads and cereals, fruit, vegetables, legumes, nuts and seeds.

What is fibre?

Dietary fibre is the part of plant foods that is not digested in the stomach or small intestine. It passes relatively unchanged into the large intestine or colon, where bacteria break it down by fermentation. Some types of fibre produce a lot of gas (wind) in the bowel when fermented.

Soluble fibre is found in oats, legumes, fruit, vegetables, seeds, cereals and soy products. Insoluble fibre is found in large amounts in wheat bran, wholegrain foods, the skins of fruit and vegetables and in some legumes.

Dietary fibre is also called 'roughage' or 'bulk'.

Fibre and health

Fibre is important for a healthy digestive system.

- Dietary fibre adds bulk to stools (faeces/bowel motions) and helps soften them, making them easier to pass.
- High fibre foods can help with weight control as they are filling and often low in fat.
- Soluble fibre slows sugar absorption and may help control blood glucose level.
- Soluble fibre may help to lower blood cholesterol level.

In addition, high fibre foods usually contain many vitamins, minerals and essential nutrients.

Fibre, resistant starch and bowel cancer

Starch is often present with fibre in plant foods and a type of starch, called resistant starch, helps keep the bowel healthy. Foods containing resistant starch include unprocessed cereals and grains, under-ripe bananas, slightly undercooked ("al dente") pasta,



cooked and cooled potato and lentils. Resistant starch is also added to some breakfast cereals and fibre supplement products.

Like fibre, resistant starch is broken down by fermentation in the large bowel. When bacteria in the bowel ferment fibre and resistant starch, the bacteria in the bowel grow and multiply. This increases the bulk of the stool, so it passes more quickly and easily through the bowel. The faster stools pass through the bowel, the less time any cancer-causing substances will be in contact with the bowel.

Fermentation of resistant starch also produces short-chain fatty acids, which may protect against cancer.

Effects of low fibre

A diet that is low in fibre may contribute to:

- Constipation
- Haemorrhoids (piles)
- Bowel cancer
- Diverticular disease
- Irritable bowel syndrome
- High blood cholesterol
- Being overweight.

Some high fibre foods

Breads, cakes, biscuits

- Wholemeal, wholegrain, multigrain, white with added fibre, soy and linseed breads.
- Cakes, biscuits, scones and muffins made with wholemeal flour (some may be high in fat).
- Wholegrain crackers (e.g., *Ryvita*) and wholemeal crackers (e.g., *Vita Wheat*).

Breakfast cereals

- Rolled oats, wholemeal porridge.
- Bran cereals (e.g., *All-Bran*, *Sultana Bran*).
- Unprocessed wheat bran (two tablespoons a day is enough), oat bran, rice bran.
- Whole wheat breakfast cereals (e.g., *Weetbix*, *Weeties*, *Vita Brits* etc.).
- Muesli (toasted muesli is often high in fat – check the label).

Grains and grain foods

- Oats, rye, barley, buckwheat, cracked wheat.
- Brown rice, polenta, couscous.
- Pasta - spinach or wholemeal.

Self care

- Eat a wide variety of high fibre foods. Aim to eat at least 3 serves of vegetables, 2 serves of fruit and some whole grain and cereal foods every day.
- Increase fibre in diet gradually, to avoid gas, bloating and cramping.
- Eat regular meals to stimulate bowel movement.
- Never ignore the urge to open bowels.
- Drink at least two litres (eight glasses) of water daily, unless a doctor advises not to. Fibre absorbs water, so it is important to make sure you drink plenty of fluid.
- Exercise regularly.

Fibre supplements

The best source of fibre is high fibre food, but fibre intake can also be increased with fibre supplement products. These products are used to help supplement your daily fibre intake to promote a healthy digestive system.

Psyllium (e.g., *Metamucil*, *Nucolox*, *Agiofibe*), Inulin (e.g., *Metamucil Fibresure*). Guar gum (e.g., *Benefiber*), Ispaghula (e.g., *Fybogel*) and Sterculia (e.g., *Normacol Plus*, *Normalife*) are common ingredients of fibre supplement products. They may produce less wind than high fibre foods.

Note: Some fibre supplements must be taken with plenty of fluid. Always follow label instructions carefully.

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist

Vegetables

- Legumes such as chick peas, lentils.
- Beans (e.g., baked, broad, butter, kidney, Lima, soy beans).
- Potatoes, carrots, beetroot, parsnips, sweet potatoes, turnips, yams.
- Broccoli, brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, mushrooms, leeks, peas, snow peas, spinach.

Note: Salad vegetables such as celery, lettuce and cucumber are **not** good sources of fibre.

Nuts and seeds

- All kinds (some nuts are also high in fat).

Fruit

- All fresh and dried fruit, especially with skin, seeds, pith.
- Apples, apricots, bananas, pears, plums, oranges and berries are particularly high in fibre.

Note: Fruit juices provide less fibre than eating the whole fruit.

Related fact cards

- *Constipation*
- *Haemorrhoids*
- *Irritable Bowel Syndrome*

For more information

Dietitians Association – listed under 'D' in the white pages of the phone book or website www.daa.asn.au

Health/Insite – website www.healthinsite.gov.au

The Gut Foundation – phone (02) 9382 2749 or visit www.gut.nsw.edu.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) leaflets – your pharmacist can advise on availability.

NPS Medicines Line – phone 1300 888 763 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm EST.

The Poisons Information Centre – in case of poisoning phone 131 126 from anywhere in Australia.

Pharmacy Self Care Support – phone 1300 369 772 and ask for the Pharmacy Self Care Field Officer.

Pharmacists are medicines experts. Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.

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