

PENNY SAVER NEWS

FAX: 932-5261

June 2, 2011

BY: Mary A. Keith, Ph.D., L.D.
Food, Nutrition and Health Agent**HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY**

5339 S. County Road 579

Seffner, FL 33584-3334

PH:(813)744-5519 x 136, FAX:744-5776
e-mail:mkeith@ufl.edu**Fiber – The Good or The Bad of It**

In case you haven't noticed, dietary fiber is one of the hottest foodie trends of the year. Yogurt has fiber, bread has it, crackers have it, even juice has it now. It seems like everyone has decided that Grandmother knew best when she told us to eat our roughage. But the fiber in most of these foods is not the roughage that Grandmother knew. And the effects of fiber on our systems might not be what Grandmother expected, nor what we think we're getting.

Over the years, the reasons why we eat fiber have changed. In our grandparents' time, fiber was to 'keep us regular'. Constipation was the concern, and enough dietary fiber would help prevent that. Then some years ago the big word about fiber was cholesterol and heart health. Later, fiber was promoted to lower the glycemic index of our meals. More recently fiber was what we needed to promote the growth of good bacteria in our guts. Now the reason for eating fiber is to improve our immunity, and most maybe improve our moods. Many reasons for fiber, but do any of them work?

Well, some kinds of fiber do help some of those things. Bran fiber, such as from whole wheat, is great for easing constipation. The fiber in oats, barley, okra and psyllium really is good for lowering cholesterol. The fiber in vegetables and whole grains will slow down how fast our food gets converted into sugars and sent into our blood. So they do lower the glycemic response to food. The research on immunity and mood is still in very early stages, so the jury is still out on those.

But did you notice that with each of these reasons for eating fiber, it was a different kind of fiber that worked? That's part of the current problem. The kind of fiber that is easiest to add to many foods, and that is the most commonly used, is not the kind of fiber that helps with any of the common problems. In fact, the most commonly used fiber today, inulin extracted from chicory roots, generally increases our problems with too much gas, with bloating, cramping and stomach rumbling.

Inulin is a fiber made from long strings of fructose tied together. If the roots were not harvested at the right time we'd get lots of fructose instead of fiber. There are some of these fructose strings in onions and a variety of other vegetables. But it's easiest to get large amounts from chicory. Inulin has no taste, no color, doesn't make food sticky or slimy, too dry or too wet. It's very easy to add to foods in ways that we can't tell it's there. But it seems like our bodies can't tell either, because it has few of the good qualities we think we're getting from fiber. Inulin has no effect on constipation, cholesterol, triglycerides or blood sugar.

On the other hand, the bacteria in our lower guts can use it. They like it, a lot. So they happily grow faster, making lots more gas in the process. And we feel that effect, with bloating, burbling and burping. More and more people are going to doctors complaining of gas, bloating and swelling, at the same time that fiber is being added to so many foods. Is it more than a coincidence? Hmmm.

Now it might turn out that inulin's effect on these bacteria really is very good for us. As they grow they prevent some dangerous bacteria from growing. Having more of these good bacteria in our guts might be stimulating our immune systems in positive ways. And there are tiny hints that people with more of these good bacteria generally

are in a better mood. Is it just because they feel better, or are the bacteria producing something that affects their mood? No one knows yet.

But if your mood has been damped recently by too much gas, by bloating or cramping, but embarrassing burbles coming from your tummy, take a look at how many fiber-fortified foods are in your diet. You might want to stick to whole grains, fruits and veggies for your fiber.

Here's an easy recipe to use our fresh local tomatoes in a slightly different way. If you want a lower-fat version, simply omit the cheese.

Cheesy Baked Tomatoes

4 large ripe tomatoes

4 Tbsp olive oil

½ C finely chopped onions

1-2 tsp minced garlic

1 C fresh bread crumbs

¼ C shredded Monterey Jack cheese

¼ C chopped fresh herbs (parsley, basil, thyme, or what your family prefers)

Preheat oven to 400°F. Cut tomatoes in half and squeeze out seeds. Turn upside down on rack to drain. Heat 2 Tbsp oil in skillet and lightly sauté onions until tender. Add garlic and heat. Add 2 Tbsp oil and bread crumbs and sauté until crumbs are golden. Add herbs and season to taste with salt and pepper if desired. Divide crumb mixture into tomato halves. Set in baking dish, sprinkle with cheese and bake 10-15 minutes, until tomatoes are heated through, the skin is starting to separate and cheese is melted.

Serves 4.