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Link Another Benefit to Fiber

Fiber - it used to be called 'roughage', and was mostly thought of as a way to avoid constipation. Now it's a rising star in the field of health benefits. Besides the constipation problem, which it does solve, fiber has been linked to at least six other health conditions.

It's easiest to understand how fiber can help the gut. By absorbing water and keeping stool material soft, fiber helps prevent or manage hemorrhoids. In the same way, it helps prevent irritable bowel syndrome. But people who all ready have IBS might need to be careful since too much at one time can produce more gas or make cramps worse. Add new fiber very gradually to your diet, so your body can adjust.

The way it works is different, but fiber in the diet also helps several blood-related conditions. Some fibers can dissolve in water. These include the fiber in oats, barley, many fruits, beans, peas and carrots. This fiber is especially good at lowering our blood cholesterol levels. How it works is not as clear, but high fiber diets have been linked to lower blood pressure. The latest study says whole grain fiber is linked to less heart failure too. Overall, people who eat more fiber live longer and have less heart disease.

By slowing down how fast our food is digested, fiber helps keep blood sugar under control. It also seems to make our muscles more sensitive to insulin, another way of combating diabetes. Fiber is a filler too. We can't digest it, we get no calories from it. But it takes up space in our stomachs and helps us feel full longer. That's a big benefit for those trying to manage both diabetes and weight.

Because fiber is usually associated with vitamins and minerals, it's best to get

your fiber from foods rather than supplements. The recommended amount for women is 21 to 25 g a day, for men it's 30 to 38 g depending on age and calories in the diet. Beans, peas and lentils are some of the best sources, giving us 5 to 10 g in a half-cup serving. Bran cereals are concentrated fiber, but other whole grain cereals with little added sugars can be very good too. Oatmeal and barley are especially good for bringing down cholesterol. Fruits and vegetables have varying amounts of fiber, but artichokes and sweet potatoes are a couple of the better sources.

If you're not eating a lot of fiber now, start changing gradually. Go to whole wheat instead of white bread, or a cereal with more fiber. Then switch to brown rice instead or mixed with the white rice. Try some other whole grains next month, such as pearled barley instead of mashed potatoes. Whatever flavor you prefer, make it fiber-full for a longer, healthier life.

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