

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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February 5, 2009

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If you're still operating on last year's understanding of fiber, it's time to get into the new year! Fiber has long since outgrown Grandmother's idea of 'roughage'. It is now one of the 'good for all kinds of things' food ingredients. The latest is a study that found that diets high in whole grains significantly reduced people's risk of having heart failure. This just adds to the list of other health conditions that fiber helps us manage or avoid.

Most of us learned as children that fiber was good for our guts. It was the way to avoid or cure constipation. Filling up on roughage is the way to keep the insides moving. But beyond constipation, diets high in fiber help prevent hemorrhoids and lower our risk of suffering from diverticulitis and irritable bowel syndrome. By acting like a sponge in there, fiber soaks up water and keeps the contents of our intestines soft. That means that the intestines don't have to work so hard to squeeze the food along. There's less damage to the walls and less chance of bulges or pockets forming.

Beyond the physical effects, some types of fiber are particularly good at sopping up cholesterol and bile acids in our intestines. Soluble fiber from oats, barley, carrots and apples as well as other foods do this very well. When these nutrients are carried 'out the other end', the levels in our blood go down. That's healthier blood!

Fiber is not digested. It is not absorbed and it doesn't give us any calories. It gets in the way of digestion. That slows down how fast sugar gets into the blood.

Lower blood sugar means less chance of diabetes. And somehow fiber seems to make our muscles more sensitive to insulin. Insulin helps take sugar out of the blood, so blood sugar levels go down even more. It's another way fiber helps prevent or manage diabetes.

It hasn't been as easy to figure out how it works, but there's some pretty good evidence that diets high in fiber help keep people's blood pressure down too. Increasing dietary fiber for just a few months brought blood pressure down, so it doesn't take a long time to work. Start soon!

By slowing digestion and absorbing water fiber also helps us to feel full faster and to stay full longer. That makes it easier for us to manage our weight without feeling like we're starving ourselves. Keeping a healthy weight is another important factor in avoiding diabetes.

There's also a little evidence that high fiber diets might help prevent some types of cancer. But by reducing the problems of blood cholesterol, pressure and sugar alone, fiber helps keep us healthy and living longer. And the sooner we get it into our diets, the more benefits we get.

How much do we need? The general recommendations are that women should get between 21 and 25 g a day, men need between 30 and 38 g a day. The younger we are, the more we should be eating. If your diet is very low in fiber now increase it gradually. If you double your fiber overnight you'll probably regret it. Gas, cramps and diarrhea are not fun! So go up slowly.

Beans, peas and lentils are some of the best sources. Half a cup will give you between 5 and 10 grams. Bran cereals and crackers could have almost as much, but

watch out for extra fat and sugar added to these foods. Fruits and vegetables are also fiber sources but there's a lot of variation. Eating the peel or skin on as many as you can will usually give you even more fiber. Make the next loaf of bread whole wheat instead of white. Using brown rice or barley instead of white rice or mashed potatoes is another easy change to make. Snack on low-fat popcorn in front of the TV. Choose corn tortillas instead of flour. Whatever way you go, start today. Live long and be healthy!

Here's a new twist on an old favorite. Using lentils shortens the cooking time by a lot. If you want to add ground beef or sausage cook it thoroughly before you stir it in.

Lentil Chili

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| 1 cup dry lentils, rinsed | 5 cups water |
| 1 - 6 oz can tomato paste | 1 Tbsp chili powder (mild or hot) |
| 1/4 cup chopped onion (or 1 Tbsp onion flakes) | 1 tsp cumin |
| 1 clove garlic chopped (or 1/4 tsp garlic powder) | 1 tsp oregano |
| 1 tsp salt | (Grated low fat cheese optional) |

Simmer lentils in water in covered pot for 30 minutes. Add rest of ingredients and simmer another 30 minutes. Top bowls with grated cheese if desired. Serves 6.

(Recipe courtesy of NorthHarvest Bean Growers Association)

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