

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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Not All Fibers Are Equal

As popular as fiber bars, fiber cereals, even fiber drinks are on the grocery shelf, it would be very easy to assume that we understand how fiber works. We could assume that the doctors have proved all the fancy health claims the packages carry. Unfortunately, those assumptions would be wrong. We're still learning what kinds of fiber there are, and we certainly don't know what they all do in our systems. Sometimes it's easier to say what they don't do.

Let's start by mentioning what kinds of fiber there are, at least the ones we know something about. Most of the fibers that are added to bars, drinks and cereals are purified. They've been isolated from one plant or another. These include inulin that is isolated from chicory. Guar gum is isolated from a type of tree resin. Carageenan is purified from a type of seaweed. Some such as polydextrose and beta-glucans can be taken from a variety of starchy foods including corn, potatoes or wheat. Cellulose can be purified from just about any plant.

You might see any of these listed in an ingredient list on a package. In their purified form they can be added to many foods without making big changes to the color, flavor or feel of the food. Some can be added to drinks without making them thick.

Whole plant foods, including whole grains, legumes (beans, peas and lentils), vegetables and fruits also contain a variety of fiber. These often don't have as much fiber as the fortified bars do, but it's the natural stuff, in natural amounts. It is also a mixture of different kinds of fiber - soluble, insoluble, resistant starch and others. And if you buy a bag of dry beans, the ingredients will only say 'beans'. There won't be any added fiber.

So, how about the claim that certain fiber bars will fill you up and keep you feeling full longer? As it turns out, eating whole foods with lots of fiber will help you feel full. Eating a fiber bar probably won't. Research finds little or no difference in how full a person feels after eating a regular or a high fiber bar, muffin or cookie. As a caller recently remarked, the bars only filled her up with gas, which was not the kind of full she wanted! These fibers also do not usually help with constipation problems.

What about fiber to lose weight? Again, when different fibers are added to foods, there's very

little evidence that they will help anyone lose weight. What is true, and what some manufacturers use to back up their labels, is that not many people who eat lots of naturally-containing fiber foods are overweight. If they've been eating lots of fruits, vegetables, beans and whole grains, of course they are not as likely to be overweight. But that is no proof that just adding more isolated fiber to a diet will automatically make the pounds melt away!

One claim that does have enough proof behind it concerns cholesterol. The FDA allows oatmeal and barley to claim that eating them (daily and in diets that are all ready low in saturated fat and cholesterol) will help lower your cholesterol. The particular type of fiber in these whole grains helps carry cholesterol out of the body. But you need to eat oats, not just drink the water around the oatmeal. You need to eat barley, not just drink beer made from barley! (Sorry guys!)

So, the kinds of fiber most likely to help you feel full, eat less, or lose weight are what you'll find in whole grains, in beans and lentils, in vegetables and fruits. They're not the ones in a new snack or drink that has "high fiber" on the label! Fill up on the whole foods and you'll be healthier all around.

Here's an easy way to prepare lentils and stretch your food dollar too. Add a splash of hot sauce if you want some heat. Serve with carrot raisin salad for more fiber.

Lentil Beef Casserole

2 cups (1 lb) dried lentils	5 cups water
1 lb lean ground beef	1 envelope onion soup mix
1 cup ketchup (or half barbeque sauce)	1 tsp yellow mustard
1 tsp vinegar	1 more cup water

Check the lentils for stones or weed seeds. Combine lentils and 5 cups water in saucepan. Bring to boil and simmer until tender, about 25 minutes. Drain. Preheat oven to 400° F. Brown beef in skillet. Crumble and drain. Stir in lentils and rest of ingredients. Transfer to baking dish. Bake 30 minutes. Serves 4.

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