

Dietary fiber — found mainly in fruits, vegetables, whole grains and legumes — is probably best known for its ability to prevent or relieve constipation. But fiber can provide other health benefits as well, such as lowering your risk of diabetes and heart disease.

If you need to add more fiber to your diet, don't worry. Increasing the amount you eat each day isn't difficult. Find out how much dietary fiber you need and ways to include more high-fiber foods into your meals and snacks.

What is dietary fiber?

Dietary fiber — also known as roughage or bulk — includes all parts of plant foods that your body can't digest or absorb. Fiber is often classified into two categories: those that don't dissolve in water (insoluble fiber) and those that do (soluble fiber).

- **Insoluble fiber.** This type of fiber increases the movement of material through your digestive system and increases stool bulk, so it can be of benefit to those who struggle with constipation or irregular stools. Whole-wheat flour, wheat bran, nuts and many vegetables are good sources of insoluble fiber.
- **Soluble fiber.** This type of fiber dissolves in water to form a gel-like material. It can help lower blood cholesterol and glucose levels. You can find generous quantities of soluble fiber in oats, peas, beans, apples, citrus fruits, carrots, barley and psyllium.

The amount of each type of fiber varies in different plant foods. To receive the greatest health benefit, eat a wide variety of high-fiber foods.

Benefits of bulking up

Unlike other food components such as fats, proteins or carbohydrates — which your body breaks down and absorbs — fiber isn't digested by your body. Therefore, it passes virtually unchanged through your stomach and small intestine and into your colon. Dietary fiber increases the weight and size of your stool and softens it. A bulky stool is easier to pass, decreasing your chance of constipation. If you have loose, watery stools, fiber may also help to solidify the stool because it absorbs water and adds bulk to stool.

A high-fiber diet may lower your risk of specific disorders, such as hemorrhoids, irritable bowel syndrome and the development of small pouches in your colon (diverticular disease). Fiber — particularly soluble fiber — can also lower blood cholesterol levels and slow the absorption of sugar, which for people with diabetes, can help improve blood sugar levels. A high-fiber diet may also reduce the risk of developing type 2 diabetes.

Eating a high-fiber diet may also help with weight loss. High-fiber foods generally require more chewing time, which gives your body time to register when you're no longer hungry, so you're less likely to overeat. Also, a high-fiber diet tends to make a meal feel larger and linger longer, so you stay full for a greater amount of time. And high-fiber diets tend to be less "energy dense," which means they have fewer calories for the same volume of food.