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Fiber-Are You Getting Enough?

Fiber is an integral part of a healthy diet, and research shows that most Americans don't get as much as they should—even though they think they do! Do you fall into this category? Just last month, the American Dietetic Association released an exciting new analysis of the health implications of dietary fiber that shed further light on the situation. Okay, maybe 'exciting' is a bit of a stretch, but even I was surprised at some of the new developments in the world of fiber.

What is it? Dietary fiber is simply structural parts of plants we eat that we aren't able to fully digest. This means we aren't breaking them down and using them for energy as we do with most other carbohydrates as well as proteins and fats. Then why bother? Though we don't use fiber directly for energy, research shows that there are many beneficial effects of including it in our diet.

What does it do? There is strong evidence that eating fiber helps to lower blood pressure, improve cholesterol levels, and reduce inflammation—all positive health effects. In fact, the recommended intakes were set based on the amount necessary to decrease risk of coronary heart disease. Consumption of fiber may also decrease risk for diabetes, improve gastrointestinal function, and even help to control weight—though the evidence here is not as strong. There are also some claims that fiber decreases the risk of certain types of cancers, but the research in this area is inconsistent.

Where can we find it? Fiber is only found in plant foods such as fruits, vegetables, nuts, and grains. Beans, peas, and bran cereals are some of the best sources, but generally whole grains and fresh, raw fruits and vegetables have a fair amount of fiber. As with anything else, fiber can also be found in an array of dietary supplements. Keep in mind, however, that most of the positive effects of fiber are based on research of 'real' foods. This means it is not really known if a supplement will produce the same health benefits. Regardless, there are many other beneficial substances in 'real' foods that modern science has not been able to re-create for supplements—so trade in the pill bottle for a salad, or start your day with a warm bowl of oatmeal.

How much do we need? Current recommendations are 14g dietary fiber per 1,000 calories of total food intake. This equals about 25g/day for adult women and 38g/day for adult men. Incredibly, when surveyed, 73% of individuals with a fiber intake below 20g/day think their intake is "about right"—and the average American only eats around 15g/day!

Take a closer look at your diet, and read a few nutrition facts labels to see if you're getting enough fiber each day. If not, try to take a few steps to improve your diet—start by adding a few more fruits and vegetables. Are you getting 5-a-day? It is very important that fluid intake should be increased if you are increasing your intake of fiber. A couple of extra glasses of water will help your body to handle the extra fiber. And remember, fiber intake should be increased gradually to allow your body time to adapt—sharp increases in fiber intake will likely be accompanied some undesirable gastrointestinal side effects. *Kentz Willis, M.S., is the University Extension Educator in Nutrition and Food Safety for Sheridan and Johnson counties. He can be reached via email at kwillis3@uwyo.edu.*