

Module 4, Lesson 1 Tool:

The Role of Fiber

Fiber is so important for many aspects of health, including the health of those friendly gut bacteria. Below is an overview of the two different kinds of fiber, recommendations for fiber intake and the benefits of a high fiber diet.

Types of Fiber

There are two types of fiber in food: soluble fiber and insoluble fiber. Soluble fiber holds onto water and forms a gel during digestion. Soluble fiber's main role is to slow down digestion and help you feel full. It's also beneficial for our hearts and blood sugar.

Soluble fiber is fiber found in

- Barley
- Beans
- Legumes
- Nuts
- Oat bran
- Seeds
- Fruits and vegetables

Insoluble fiber doesn't dissolve during digestion and travels through our systems mostly unchanged. It helps move food quickly through our systems and it can bulk up stool. You want that - well-formed stool that moves quickly through the intestines. If you're prone to constipation, eating more insoluble fiber can make for an easier bowel movement. If your stool is loose or watery, fiber helps to create a more formed stool.

Insoluble fiber is found in

- Fruits
- Vegetables
- Wheat bran
- Whole grains

Fiber Recommendations

Rather than worrying about how much of each type of fiber you're getting, know that if you're eating a variety of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts and seeds and you're meeting the daily fiber recommendation, you'll be getting a nice mix of both types.

Daily recommendations for fiber are:

- 38 grams/day for men 50 and younger
- 30 grams/day for men older than 50
- 25 grams/day for women 50 and younger
- 21 grams/day for women older than 50

Benefits of Fiber

We already touched on how fiber helps with healthy stool formation, but there are many other benefits, including:

- Fiber helps maintain bowel health and can lower the risk for hemorrhoids, diverticular disease and colorectal cancers
- Really good research finds increased fiber intake is linked to longer life and reduced risk of death from cardiovascular disease and many types of cancers
- Fiber can help lower LDL cholesterol and reduce blood pressure and inflammation
- Fiber is very important in achieving a healthy weight because it fills you up, takes longer to eat and tends to be more nutrient rich and nutrient dense - meaning high fiber foods tend to have more nutrients and fewer calories than fiber poor alternatives
- Fiber helps to slow the absorption of sugar from the blood, improving blood sugar levels. It's also linked to reducing the risk of developing type 2 diabetes

We know that eating a diet full of whole, fresh, minimally processed foods ensures that you can meet your fiber recommendations. There are plenty of packaged processed foods that tout high numbers of grams of fiber per serving, but many of these foods are made with manufactured fibers that most people just don't need. Plus, we know most of those foods are packed with other ingredients we want to avoid, like artificial sweeteners and processed soy protein. All this to say, you can meet your fiber recommendations through fresh foods.