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“Bulking Up” – The Benefits of Dietary Fiber

Mom was right. Eating more fiber is good for your health.

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.

According to the Mayo Clinic Food and Nutrition Department, “If you need to add more fiber to your diet, don’t worry. Increasing the amount you eat each day isn’t difficult.

“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).

“...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 (diverticulosis). 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.”

“Chewing your food thoroughly, especially meats or fruits with seeds, can also help reduce the risk of diverticulitis, an inflammation that occurs when food gets caught in the small pouches (diverticula) in the colon,” said Dr. Ismail.

Simple Suggestions for Getting Your Fiber

According to Mayo Clinic, “If you aren’t getting enough fiber each day, you may need to boost your intake. Choose whole-grain products, raw or cooked fruits and vegetables, and dried beans and peas. Refined or processed foods — such as fruit juice, white bread and pasta, and non-whole-grain cereals — are lower in fiber content.

Need ideas for high-fiber meals and snacks? Try these suggestions:

- Start your day with a high-fiber breakfast cereal — 5 or more grams of fiber per serving. Opt for cereals with “bran” or “fiber” in the name. Or add a few tablespoons of unprocessed wheat bran to your favorite cereal.
- Add crushed bran cereal or unprocessed wheat bran to baked products such as meatloaf, breads, muffins, casseroles, cakes and cookies. You can also use bran products as a crunchy topping for casseroles, salads or cooked vegetables.
- Switch to whole-grain breads. These breads list whole wheat, whole-wheat flour or another whole grain as the first ingredient on the label. Look for a brand with at least 2 grams of dietary fiber per serving.
- Substitute whole-grain flour for half or all of the white flour when baking bread. Whole-grain flour is heavier than white flour. In yeast breads, use a bit more yeast or let the dough rise longer. When using baking powder, increase it by 1 teaspoon for every 3 cups of whole-grain flour.
- Eat more whole grains and whole-grain products. Experiment with brown rice, barley, whole-wheat pasta and bulgur.
- Take advantage of ready-to-use vegetables. Mix chopped frozen broccoli into prepared spaghetti sauce. Snack on baby carrots.

- Eat more beans, peas and lentils. Add kidney beans to canned soup or a green salad. Or make nachos with refried black beans, baked tortilla chips and salsa.
- Eat fruit at every meal. Apples, bananas, oranges, pears and berries are good sources of fiber.
- Make snacks count. Fresh and dried fruit, raw vegetables, and low-fat popcorn and whole-grain crackers are all good choices.