



Getting your fibre

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All our lives we have been told to eat fibre because “it’s good for us.” Well, it is. And we should.

This lesson has been so well promoted that we are even seeing food manufacturers add fibre to their products including some as odd as juice, yoghurt and ice cream. There are even high-fibre bottled waters! Can these possibly be as good as a serving or two of legumes or fruit?

Dietary fibre consists of naturally occurring plant materials that your body cannot digest. Examples include fibre naturally found in whole grain breads and cereals, beans, lentils, fruits and vegetables. Fibre is also our main source of carbohydrates which supplies our body with easy to use fuel. Grain products also provide important vitamins and minerals such as thiamine, riboflavin, niacin, iron, zinc and magnesium. Grain products also provide fibre which may reduce the risk for heart disease, diabetes and obesity and of course, prevent constipation.

Added fibre such as that boosting claims of various foods is not the same as dietary fibre. Instead of containing the whole of the fibre, “functional fibre” as it is called, contains isolated fibre that is extracted from food, or chemically manufactured. Functional fibre may have benefits, though dietary fibre is still the most complete.

Types of isolated fibre include inulin, pectin, polydextrose, methylcellulose and maltodextrin. A food claiming to be high fibre which normally would not be expected to be (think yoghurt, ice cream and highly refined white bread) you are certain to find one or more of these in the ingredients listing.

Dieticians of Canada recommends men consume about 38 grams of fibre per day and women 25g. How much is that? Let’s start with one medium-sized, cooked potato with skin. That has three to four grams of fibre. Half a cup of cooked carrot contains 2.2g; one orange; 3.6g; half an avocado, 6.7g; and a quarter cup of whole almonds provides four grams.

While functional fibre will have some of the same benefits of dietary fibre, some caution is warranted. After all, many now ‘high-fibre’ foods that use isolated fibre are not especially nutritious. Imagine how much easier it is to over indulge in fibre-enhanced ice cream than a plate of broccoli?

To get the most nutritional value, Dieticians of Canada recommend “going for the whole grain.” Whole grains include all parts of the grain kernel. As the whole grain is refined during processing, more and more nutrients are lost. It’s best to choose foods with “whole” in front of the grain in the ingredient list. For example,

whole grain wheat or whole rye flour instead of wheat or rye flour.

The health benefits of dietary fibre exceed those of functional fibre, plus

they provide other benefits. After all, eating a muffin made with refined flour and added fibre is not the same as one made from whole grains which retains all the healthful components of the grain.

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go for the whole grain.*