

# Nutrition

## fact sheet



## Dietary Fiber: An Important Link in the Fight Against Heart Disease

**D**ietary fiber is probably best known for its ability to prevent and relieve constipation. What many people don't realize is that fiber also provides other health benefits such as helping maintain a healthy heart.

### *What is dietary fiber?*

Dietary fiber is a broad term that describes the part of plant foods that your body cannot digest. It is found mainly in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes (beans and peas), nuts and seeds. Fiber is what puts the bulk in lettuce, the crunch in carrots and the chewiness in whole-grain bread. Foods high in fiber are usually low in calories and fat while packed with vitamins, minerals and other important nutrients.

### *Heart disease – The Leading Cause of Death in the United States*

Heart disease continues to be a critical health issue for Americans. In fact, heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control. More than 58 million Americans suffer from some form of heart disease. Although commonly mistaken as a disease affecting mostly men and the elderly, heart disease is also a serious health risk for women of all ages. In fact, one

in every three women will die from heart disease, compared to one in 30 who will die from breast cancer.

The good news is that heart disease is largely preventable through positive lifestyle changes, sometimes combined with medication.

Research has shown that a diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol and rich in fiber may reduce the incidence of risk factors for heart disease when combined with an active lifestyle.

### *Major heart disease risk factors*

The National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute has identified several major risk factors that can significantly increase an individual's risk of developing heart disease. These include high blood cholesterol, high blood pressure and obesity.

### *How Fiber Can Help*

#### **Lowering high blood cholesterol**

Eating certain foods rich in fiber can help lower blood cholesterol. The

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## Information

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fiber in beans, some grains, such as oats, barley, and psyllium seed helps lower high levels of blood cholesterol for some people. These foods are also low in fat which can help lower the risk of heart disease. Researchers have also found that taking a psyllium fiber supplement can reduce the dose of prescription statin drugs needed to treat patients who already suffer from high cholesterol.

**Lowering high blood pressure** High blood pressure is often called “the silent killer” because it can strike with no symptoms. In fact, many people live with high blood pressure for years because they don’t know they have it. High blood pressure directly increases the risk of coronary heart disease (which leads to heart attack) and stroke, especially when it’s present with other risk factors. Typically, blood pressure rises when arteries become damaged and clogged as a result of high blood cholesterol. Research shows that diets rich in fiber can help lower blood pressure, since these diets are often lower in fat and calories.

**Preventing obesity** Fiber may play a role in preventing obesity, another risk factor for heart disease, as well as help adults achieve a healthy weight. Reducing fat intake while increasing fiber can benefit anyone who wants to lose weight or maintain their weight. A high-fiber diet is often lower in calories because fiber-rich foods tend to make you feel full sooner so you eat less. With the added bulk, fiber-rich foods also can help you feel full longer. Also, high-fiber foods tend to be less “energy dense,” which means they have fewer calories for the same volume of food.

### *How Much Fiber is Enough?*

Getting enough fiber into your daily diet is important for good health. The recommended daily allowance of dietary fiber for men is 30 to 38 grams per day and for women, 21 to 25 grams. Currently, most Americans consume only about half the recommended amount. At this level, they are missing out on fiber’s potential health benefits.

### *Ways to Increase Your Daily Fiber Intake*

Here are some simple tips to help you add fiber to your diet:

- Eat more fruits and vegetables—at least 2 cups of fruit and 2½ cups of vegetables a day.
- Choose a variety of fiber sources each day. For example, high-fiber foods like berries, citrus fruits, oatmeal, and beans—plus dark green vegetables and whole grain bread and cereal.
- Keep bags of frozen vegetables in your freezer. Add a few handfuls to soups, sauces, casseroles or pasta dishes. Or, lightly defrost in the microwave and add to salads.
- Serve entrees like sliced steak, chicken or fish on a “bed” of grilled zucchini, sautéed spinach or sliced onions.
- Order pizza with vegetable toppings such as broccoli, spinach, mushroom and green pepper.
- Snack on air-popped popcorn, dry-roasted nuts and seeds. Even your favorite whole-grain cereal is a satisfying, fiber-filled snack.
- Check with your registered dietitian or healthcare provider concerning the appropriate use of fiber supplements.