

A closer look at fiber, the comeback of a non food

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Published: 7/7/2007

A Bible text says something about God making foolish the wisdom of the wise. I often think about this regarding fiber, because it is a part of our food that goes right through our bodies and into the toilet without ever being used. What a waste — right?

Wrong. That was the thinking, even of many scientists, from the late 1800s until the early 1970s. But now we know that fiber is like a general — it controls many body processes. How about curbing obesity, diabetes and constipation? Read on.

Fiber is the framework of plants. Removing it increased the caloric density of food and the efficiency and speed with which it was absorbed into the bloodstream. Removing it also prolonged shelf life.

So what changed? Here are some of the things we are learning about fiber:

- Insoluble fiber absorbs and holds water — from four to six times its own volume — creating soft, spongy masses in the stomach and in the small and large intestines. The result? A sense of fullness occurs much sooner than with low-fiber foods, helping to protect against overeating and obesity.
- The fiber masses, acting like soaked-up sponges, fill the intestines more completely and this stimulates them to lively activity. Instead of idling for several days in the gastrointestinal tract in compacted clumps, as low-fiber foods do, the spongy masses pass along much more quickly and are evacuated in 24 to 36 hours. This action cures most constipation and significantly relieves problems with hemorrhoids and diverticular disease.
- Because of the shorter transit time, less putrefaction occurs in the intestines. There is less time for carcinogens and other harmful end-products to irritate the bowel walls. The fiber also dilutes the damaging food residues. These fiber-related actions may explain the lower colon cancer rates among people with high fiber intakes.
- Fiber also slows down the rate at which nutrients enter the bloodstream. This helps smooth out the ups and downs of blood sugar levels and provides more consistent energy throughout the day. A stabilized blood sugar relieves most hypoglycemia (low blood sugar) and aids in the control of diabetes (high blood sugar). Where do you find insoluble fiber? The best sources are whole grain products and legumes (beans, peas, lentils, etc).
- Soluble fiber, on the other hand, helps the body absorb nutrients. Soluble fiber also effectively helps lower cholesterol by attaching itself to cholesterol and other by-products of fat digestion and pulling them right out of the body. Without this action most of the leftover cholesterol would be reabsorbed into the blood stream, adding to the already high levels found in most Westerners. Soluble fiber is especially plentiful in oats and most fruit.

- Fiber is abundant in all unrefined whole plant foods. Eating a variety of fruit, whole grains, vegetables and legumes assures a plentiful supply of the many varieties of fiber the body needs.

Juicers hit the market some years ago like an explosion. Across the country busy people, accustomed to technological wonders and dedicated to health improvement, welcomed yet another exciting shortcut to the good life: fruit and vegetable juicers.

Most of the juicers deliver products that are quite rich in nutrients, but almost devoid of fiber. Ten pounds of fresh produce may yield a quart or two of juice, but nearly all the precious fiber the body so badly needs, goes out with the garbage.

Today there are juice machines available that retain food fiber. The product is thicker, but can be diluted to the desired consistency.

It has become popular (at least in commercials) to add wheat, oat or other brans to food. But most people don't need fiber pills, chewables, extracted brans or other costly supplements. It would take a whole bottle of fiber pills to supply the fiber contained in a bowl of whole grain cereal with strawberries. Fiber is not something you can sprinkle on a plate of steak and eggs and make it OK.

The bottom line?

Focus on whole-grain cereals and breads, fresh fruit and vegetables, and plenty of beans and other legumes. This is the healthiest, safest, cheapest and best way to get the fiber you need, and to prevent or avoid many of today's lifestyle diseases.

Aileen Ludington, M.D., spent 26 years as an anesthesiologist married to a heart surgeon. When he died unexpectedly in mid-life, she switched to preventive or lifestyle medicine. She teaches and writes about the degenerative diseases that can be controlled through lifestyle changes. Dr. Ludington has six children, 19 grandchildren and has authored or coauthored six books.