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## **Don't forget the fiber**

It's not just for digestion any more. A range of conditions, from diabetes to obesity, benefits from diets rich in fiber.

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When the National Fiber Council's U.S. Consumer survey on dietary fiber was released recently, the result that most surprised Pat Baird was that people knew as much as they did. "That is not my experience," the registered dietitian said. "Most people do not realize how important fiber can be."

The survey verified that:

Though many of those questioned did know about the health benefits to the heart of eating fiber, and many also know that they personally don't eat enough fruits, vegetables and whole grains, they do not know how many grams of fiber are recommended per day, or which foods provide the best sources.

Most folks link fiber to digestive health and regularity, Baird said in a telephone interview, "but above and beyond digestive health is where the real news is, and it is expanding every day."

Fiber is now recognized for its role in lowering blood cholesterol, managing glucose levels so critical to diabetics and in aiding weight management.

Baird, a board member of the Fiber Council, said too few people actually know what fiber is. She said it can be defined as "those plant constituents not affected by the human digestive system.

"It is the forgotten element on food labels, falling behind fat, sugar and sodium," she continued.

The National Fiber Council, founded in 2004, wants to elevate the appreciation of fiber's importance in our diet. Some facts about the two kinds of fiber:

### Soluble fiber

Soluble fiber, which includes oats, fruits and vegetables, beans (legumes), barley and psyllium, dissolves in water and may form a gel. (Think oatmeal.)

Certain kinds of soluble fiber absorb water and trap sugars, cholesterol and fats in the stomach and carry them through the digestive tract. This can help lower cholesterol and regulate glucose levels.

### Insoluble fiber

Insoluble fiber adds bulk to the stool and contributes to bowel regularity. Whole wheat flour, wheat bran and some vegetables are the primary sources of insoluble fiber.

Most plant foods contain both varieties of fiber, and both are helpful to a healthful diet.

For instance, fiber can be important in the nation's battle against obesity. Fiber itself does not add weight because it is not digested by the body.

The impact of fiber consumption on weight loss diets is dependent on which food category, if any, the diet eliminates.

The proliferation of high protein, low-carbohydrate diets is one reason Americans get far less fiber - an estimated average of 10 grams - than the recommended 32 grams per day, Baird said.

"Americans get brainwashed into cutting out whole categories of food . . . (But) we're eating on the run, a candy bar here, an ice cream cone there" -- in other words, foods low in fiber.

"Putting fiber in the diet can help (lessen) fat and sugar intake," Baird added.

Though Baird is adamant that Americans are not getting enough fiber, she cautions against a dramatic increase of it.

"People should gradually build up their fiber intake over time. Drinking a lot of water is critical . . . or water will be pulled out of the gut and stomach (by the soluble fiber), which can cause bloating and constipation."

The best way to ingest fiber is in food, she said; many products are now fortified with fiber, including some you might not suspect.

Baird recommends that shoppers add fiber by further examining the nutrition food facts on the manufactured foods they buy.

But she mentioned seasonal produce such as watermelon, peaches, nectarines, corn on the cob and sweet potatoes as excellent sources of fiber.

If getting 32 grams of fiber from food proves too challenging, she suggests a fiber supplement, available in pharmacies and some grocery stores.

*For more information from the National Fiber Council, go to [www.nationalfiberCouncil.org](http://www.nationalfiberCouncil.org).*