



Clarion Ledger

Are you getting enough fiber in your food?

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A diagnosis of stomach cancer six years ago was the wake-up call that prompted Pam West to overhaul her diet by adding significant amounts of fiber.

The Ridgeland resident did the research and created a high-fiber diet that consists primarily of fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains and lots of water.

"I actually learned to eat after my bout with cancer," says West, 49, who had three-fourths of her stomach and spleen removed. "I once lived to eat. Today, I eat to live."

Now cancer-free, the state of Mississippi accountant is grateful for a second chance to make educated decisions about her health.

"I have made a conscious effort to add foods into my diet that provide all of the nutrients required for sustaining a healthy body and longevity," West said.

The high-fiber, low-fat diet West follows fits the suggested guidelines proposed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, says Emmy Parkes, a registered dietitian at the University of Mississippi Medical Center.

"Most people get about 12 to 15 grams of fiber per day," Parkes said. "That's pretty low compared to what we're supposed to get. If they ate five servings of fruits and vegetables a day, they would be getting a good amount of fiber."

The Dietary Approach to Stop Hypertension Diet, also called the DASH Diet, recommends a minimum of 30 grams of fiber per day, but fruits and vegetables should not be the entire focus, Parkes said. The USDA Food Guide Pyramid's recommendation is to "make half your grains whole." That doesn't necessarily mean having to say no to all white bread, white flour and white pasta products.

"If you eat a lot of oatmeal and whole grain pasta, white bread is not a problem," Parkes said. "If you eat the whole-grain bread and cereal, you can have the white pasta."

Dr. Gene M. Kubacki, a family practitioner with Hinds Internal Medicine and Central Mississippi Medical Center, said increasing fiber intake is a good way to improve overall health. High-fiber diets significantly decrease the risks of cardiovascular disease and diabetes and help lower cholesterol, he said. Fiber-rich diets also reduce the occurrence of diverticulosis, an inflammation of the large intestine, and diverticulitis, an inflammation of the wall of the intestine. Both are painful and common conditions.

One of the first suggestions Kubacki has for patients suffering from cardiovascular disease, diabetes, high cholesterol, diverticulosis and irritable bowel syndrome is to increase their fiber intake.

"We're reactive instead of preventative," Kubacki said. "Hopefully, we can become more proactive in preventing diseases."

Because medical research continues to support the health benefits of fiber-rich foods, Americans are making an effort to incorporate them into their diets.

"For the last year, there has been an increase in the number of people who want to add dietary fiber to their diets," said Harry Balzer, vice president of food and beverage consumption for The NPD Group, a New York-based firm that provides consumer and retail market research information for a wide range of industries. He has followed Americans' eating and drinking patterns for 25 years and is the author of the group's Annual Report on Eating Patterns in America. According to Balzer's 2006 report, foods with whole grains are the No. 1 products consumers want to add more of to their diets (64 percent), with dietary fiber the No. 2 choice (59 percent).

The recommendations on fiber intake haven't changed much during the last two decades, when the American Cancer Society first conducted studies linking fiber to cancer prevention, said Kathy Warwick, a registered dietitian for 25 years and Clarion-Ledger columnist. She does acknowledge, however, an increased emphasis in dietary recommendations in recent years.

"It used to be five fruits and vegetables a day," said Warwick, whose two-year tenure as president of the Mississippi Dietetic Association ended May 18. "Now it's seven to 12. But keep in mind that a serving is actually quite a small handful. It's a small orange, a small handful of grapes, a small handful of baby carrots. We are so tuned in to huge portions, that when someone says to have seven servings, we're envisioning an entire 10-pound bag of fruit a day. It's not as hard as the number seven sounds like."

What does create some confusion is food manufacturers have become increasingly creative at packaging their products. Some products that advertise "whole grain," for example, actually have very little, if any, fiber content.

"You have to really focus on some label reading," Warwick warns. "You have to turn the box or bag around and read the label and compare the grams of fiber. Just because it says whole grain on the front doesn't mean it is high fiber."

Warwick, also a certified diabetes educator, suggests consumers line up three to four brands of cereal, for instance, study their labels, and try to pick the one with the most grams of dietary fiber and the least grams of sugar.

"There's not the perfect cereal, cracker or bread," Warwick said. "But if I can compare them, pick the one that has more dietary fiber and less total sugar, that's gonna be a better choice."

Parkes and Warwick warn consumers not to go from a low- to high-fiber diet all at once. Instead, the suggestion is to gradually add foods rich in the nutrient so as not to shock the body, causing a bad tummy ache.

It's also important, Warwick says, to add liquids to your diet along with the fiber. For each additional serving of high-fiber food, especially breads and cereals, added to the diet, the suggestion is to add a 6- to 8-ounce serving of a liquid.

Becky Arrington, a stay-at-home mother of three, began adding high-fiber, low-fat foods to her family's meals 17 years ago, when her middle son was just 1.

"I took a good look in the mirror and thought, 'This is disgusting.' I decided we needed a change. Ever since then I've been reading labels." The immediate result is that she lost weight and gained energy.

Arrington tries not to purchase a packaged product with less than 5 grams of fiber. Because of her buying and cooking habits, her children (D.J., 21; Adam, 18; and Shelby, 14) have grown up eating mostly whole-grain breads, high-fiber cereals, granola bars, casseroles with a variety of vegetables and lots of fresh fruits and vegetables. A family favorite is fresh asparagus, zucchini, squash and green beans cooked on the grill with a little olive oil. Arrington even adds broccoli and artichokes to their lasagna.

Not too long ago, the Jackson resident began buying whole-wheat pasta. Because of its darker color, she didn't know how the family would respond, but said, "So far, I haven't gotten any complaints." In the long run, she hopes her children will continue their habits once they are on their own.

Arrington admits enticing the children to eat fiber-rich foods wasn't always easy. "I used to have to sneak stuff into their foods. But they're older now and can comprehend a little more. The older they get, they realize, 'Momma's not making this up.' "

## WAYS TO INCREASE DAILY FIBER INTAKE

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

- Eat more fruits and vegetables, at least 2 cups of fruit and 3 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, sauteed 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.

Source: American Dietetic Association

## TYPES OF DIETARY FIBER

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).

- Insoluble fiber - This type of fiber increases the movement of material through your digestive system and increases stool bulk, so it can be of benefit to those who struggle with constipation or irregular stools. Whole-wheat flour, wheat bran, nuts and many vegetables are good sources of insoluble fiber.
- Soluble fiber - This type of fiber dissolves in water to form a gel-like material. It can help lower blood cholesterol and glucose levels. You can find generous quantities of soluble fiber in oats, peas, beans, apples, citrus fruits, carrots, barley and psyllium.

The amount of each type of fiber varies in different plant foods. To receive the greatest health benefit, eat a wide variety of high-fiber foods.

Source: The Mayo Clinic

