

# Edinburgh Community Food on why fibre really is good for you!

By Nicola Murray (Student-on-Placement at ECF, Abertay University)

So, what is the big deal about dietary fibre? Is it just to keep us regular? In a word, no – it does so much more!

Fibre is an important part of a healthy balanced diet and has many benefits for our overall health. It can improve not only our digestive health – think constipation, bowel cancer or diverticular disease – but can help reduce the risk of heart disease, strokes, diabetes and some others cancers too. High fibre foods keep us feeling fuller for longer by slowing down digestion. This can help us maintain a healthy weight as we are less likely to reach for a high sugar mid-morning snack.

In the UK, the average person consumes around 14g of fibre per day which is much lower than the recommend 18g. Fibre is a complex carbohydrate found only in plant foods. Foods such as meat, fish, and dairy don't contain any at all. Simple carbohydrates (like sugars) are broken down to provide fuel but dietary fibre has other important roles in the body. While we gain few nutrients or energy from fibre its passage through our digestive system helps remove potentially harmful waste from the body. Moreover, some types of fibre are actually fermented in the lower intestine, producing some important nutrients like vitamin K (which helps our blood clot), B12 (for processing energy) and fatty acids (which are great for our hearts).

There are two different type of fibre: soluble and insoluble. Soluble fibre – found in fruits, vegetables, grains, beans and pulses – can be digested by our bodies as it is dissolved in

water and forms a gel in the gut. It is then passed through the GI tract, absorbing water and slowing down our digestion. What this does is help keep stool soft – making it easier to pass – which can prevent or treat constipation.

Insoluble fibre – found in whole grains, vegetables, high fibre cereals, nuts and seeds – cannot be digested by the body. It passes through our gut without being broken down and helps other foods move through our digestive system more easily. This keeps our bowels healthy and helps prevent digestive problems. If suffering from diarrhoea we should limit the amount of soluble fibre we are consuming and increase the insoluble fibres. On the other hand, if suffering from constipation we should increase soluble fibre (e.g. fruit and veg) and reduce the insoluble type.

Box-out – health benefits of fibre

- Keeps us regular
- Helps reduce cholesterol
- Lowers risk of heart disease, strokes and diabetes
- Assists in removing waste from the body
- May help lower blood pressure
- Keeps us fuller for longer, helping us to maintain a healthy weight
- Produces vitamins K and B12, plus healthy fatty acids in the colon
- Provides food for healthy gut bacteria
- Helps relieve diarrhoea, constipation and haemorrhoids

To increase the amount of fibre in our diets try to incorporate fibre into every meal – aim for 2 portions.

Top tips for increasing your fibre

- Swap white bread, rice and pasta for tastier wholemeal alternatives
- Eat more oat-based foods such as no-added-sugar porridge, muesli or oatcakes
- Try to incorporate fibre into every meal – aim for 2

portions per meal

- Go for whole fruit rather than fruit juice
- Go for more highly nutritious and high fibre lentils, beans and other pulses
- Try going 'veggie' a few days a week
- Increase your fibre intake fibre slowly to reduce the risk of bloating and stomach cramps
- Drink plenty of water to help the passage of the fibre in the gut

Submitted by [Nicola Murray \(Abertay University\)](#)

