

# Sound the fiber alarm: Most people need more of it in their diet

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There are a lot of health factors to keep in mind as we navigate through the dietary day: calories, carbohydrates, protein, saturated fat, vitamins and minerals, to name a few.

Did you forget fiber? A lot of people do.

"We've known this forever, and it has to get rediscovered all the time," said Joanne Slavin, professor of food science and nutrition at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. "Fiber is really good medicine. It's the one thing we want people to eat more of."

For decades, that message has been preached by dietitians, headlined in health magazines, and inscribed on packages of cereal, many other foods and dietary supplements.

Yet studies show many people in the United States fall well short of the [fiber intake](#) they need. [In one alarming example](#), a 2017 analysis in the *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine* concluded that 95% of adults and children don't consume the amount of fiber recommended for good health.

Those recommendations vary by age and gender, but Slavin said the average is about 28 grams of fiber per day, "and the average intake is only about 14 grams. So, for most people, there's a 14-gram gap."

Fiber is the material in plant-based foods that can't be broken down and passes through the system undigested. It's mostly found in fruits, vegetables, nuts, whole grains and cereals. Why is it important? Let us count the ways.

Fiber [has been shown](#) to help protect against [heart disease](#), diabetes, diverticulitis, inflammatory bowel syndrome, obesity and colorectal cancer. Fiber can help flush toxins from the body, lower cholesterol and promote [weight loss](#) because it helps people feel fuller while consuming fewer calories.

But when people eat on the run, skimp on fruits and vegetables and snack on processed foods, "you don't have many good sources of fiber," said Judith Wylie-Rosett, a professor at the Albert Einstein College of

Medicine in New York City who specializes in the links between nutrition and disease. "The obesity epidemic is concrete evidence that we're not making as much progress as we need."

There are plenty of ways to incorporate more fiber in our diets. One pitfall, Wylie-Rosett said, is to feel overwhelmed by the challenge and try to pack in too much too quickly.

"Some people suddenly decide to increase their fiber intake all at once and get side effects, like feeling gassy and bloated," she said. "So they quit doing it."

Instead, Slavin and Wylie-Rosett recommend incremental changes on the way to a more fiber-friendly diet. Here are some tips:

- Choose breads, pastas and cereals made from whole grains, as well as brown rice.
- Eat fruits like apples and oranges rather than drinking the juice. Berries with seeds, such as strawberries, raspberries and blackberries, are good sources of fiber, as are avocados.
- Include vegetables with every meal, and incorporate vegetables and legumes—especially beans, peas and lentils—into everyday recipes. Then snack on nuts, fruits and low-calorie popcorn.

Slavin has been dispensing advice like this for years—and watching people disregard it. "It's hard to make fiber exciting," she said. "As dietitians, we prefer you eat a good diet and get all the servings of fruits and vegetables, but we also understand the average person isn't getting there. So we have to meet them where they are."

Slavin sees a growing trend toward adding fiber to foods you may not expect, from beverages to [snack foods](#) to candy gummies.

"If you're going to have a cookie, have an oatmeal cookie," she said. "It doesn't take large amounts of fiber to have a real effect. Everybody, even the fast-food industry, needs to be part of the solution. There's a lot of space to get fiber in your diet you can tolerate, and it's really important."

Provided by American Heart Association

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