

To Your Health: Disease-Fighting Fiber

The message is loud and clear. "Eat foods with adequate fiber," say the USDA Dietary Guidelines. "Eat more high-fiber foods," urges the American Cancer Society.

What is fiber and why is everyone talking about it? Coming from plant sources only, dietary fiber is that portion of fruits, vegetables, whole grain cereals and other plant foods which is not broken down by the body during digestion.

Fiber is becoming one of the most important health and nutrition issues of the '80s simply because our convenience-oriented diet doesn't have much fiber left in it. But over the years, more refined foods, as well as more fats and sweets, have replaced many of the higher fiber foods our grandparents used to enjoy -- basic foods such as fruits, vegetables, whole grain breads, and whole grain cereals.

Although fiber doesn't supply any nutrients and we can live without it, diets without an adequate amount of fiber have been linked to a number of diseases. Among them are heart disease, stroke, diabetes, obesity, and cancer.

There are two types of dietary fiber: water-insoluble and water-soluble. The benefits of the former -- adding bulk, absorbing water, and decreasing the time it takes food to move through the digestive system -- are more well known. But it is the benefits of foods high in water-soluble fiber that are making the most recent news.

Studies show that water-soluble fibers may have a beneficial effect as a dietary component in the treatment of high blood cholesterol and certain kinds of

diabetes.

Dr. James W. Anderson, professor of medicine and clinical nutrition at the University of Kentucky College of Medicine, is among those who have found a favorable relationship between water-soluble fiber and cholesterol.

Dr. Anderson conducted a series of studies using his "HCF" diet, one high in complex carbohydrates and dietary fiber with an emphasis on whole grains, fresh fruits, and vegetables. Red meat, sugar, and fats are avoided when possible, with fish and poultry substituted.

A group of men between the ages of 35 and 62 with high cholesterol levels participated in the studies. Oat bran, a concentrated source of oat fiber and an excellent source of water-soluble fiber, was added daily to the HCF diet. On this oat bran-rich diet, cholesterol levels dropped 13%. When oat bran was continued, cholesterol levels dropped, totally, almost 20%.

Not all types of cholesterol perform the same function in the body. For this reason, it's important to note that the patients who participated in these studies experienced a significant drop in the type of cholesterol that is believed to deposit into body tissues, the low-density lipoprotein cholesterol that is believed to be more closely associated with heart disease.

The body's "good" cholesterol, high-density lipoprotein (or that which removes cholesterol from the tissues), was not adversely affected by the oat bran diet. For that reason, researchers believe that even a well-balanced "average" diet that includes foods high in water-soluble

fibers may help reduce "bad" cholesterol levels and, in turn, potentially reduce the risk of heart attacks.

"Our work has shown that water-soluble fiber lowers blood cholesterol levels. If you lower your blood cholesterol 10%, you're reducing your risk for heart attack by 20%", says Dr. Anderson.

Dr. Anderson also found that his HCF diet, which included generous amounts of oat bran, helped stabilize blood sugar levels, thereby lowering the insulin needs of many diabetics. When the HCF diet was used in the treatment of adult-onset diabetics, many were able to discontinue or reduce the amount of insulin needed.

Oats, barley, and dried beans are among the best sources of water-soluble fiber, followed by fruit and vegetables. Oats, in particular, are an excellent nutritional investment. In addition to the fiber, oats contain more protein than any other grain. They are also rich in vitamins and minerals, and contain no cholesterol or sodium.

Aside from hot cereal, here are some ways to use oats in everyday meals: instead of bread crumbs as a meat extender or in stuffings and fillings; as an ingredient in toppings for coffee cakes, fruit cobblers and crisps: ground into flours and substituted for one-third of all-purpose flour in muffins, breads, pastry, even cookies and cakes, or to thicken soups, stews, and sauces.

You can also use the oat flour as coating for poultry or fish.

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