

Fiber for the Elderly



As the body ages, changes in the gastrointestinal tract occur, reducing the absorption of nutrients and slowing down intestinal motility. As a result, malabsorption, nutrient deficiency and constipation are relatively common health problems that affect elderly people of both genders. Ask your doctor about the benefits of adding more fiber to your diet.

Dietary Fiber

Dietary fiber is common in plant foods such as fruits, vegetable and legumes. Although dietary fiber cannot be digested or absorbed, it still contributes to health in a variety of ways. Dietary fiber comes in two types: soluble and insoluble fiber. Soluble fiber dissolves in water and becomes gel-like, causing it to stick to bile, toxins and other debris and drag them from your body. Insoluble fiber attracts water like a sponge and acts to clean your intestines, increase intestinal motility and stimulate regular bowel movements. Constipation is more common in the elderly due to reduced intestinal

peristalsis or rhythmic contractions, inactive lifestyles and diets low in fiber, according to the “Textbook for Functional Medicine.”

Fiber Recommendations

The Institute of Medicine of the National Academies recommends that total fiber intake for adults older than 50 should be at least 30 grams per day for men and 21 grams for women. Because insoluble fiber absorbs water, you need to drink plenty of water, too, or a high-fiber diet can lead to constipation and compound existing problems with bowel movements. Elderly people sometimes have difficulty regulating fluid levels because their thirst mechanism may be suppressed, so a conscious effort to drink plenty of fluids to maintain proper hydration and prevent constipation is key. Purified water, fresh juice, herbal tea and other non-caffeinated liquids are best.

Fiber Sources

Most whole grains, vegetables, fruits and legumes are sources of insoluble and soluble fiber.

For example, multi-grain bread, wheat germ, brown rice, broccoli, spinach, celery, carrots, zucchini, apples, pears, most berries, chickpeas, lentils and virtually all beans are especially good sources of dietary fiber. Furthermore, psyllium is a high-fiber compound you can mix into water or fruit juice. Nut and seeds contain fiber also, but you may find it difficult to properly chew them if you have dental problems or dentures. Consequently, softer sources of fiber, such as beans and whole-grain bread, are not only easier to chew, but are usually much more affordable.

Additional Health Benefits

In addition to combating constipation, dietary fiber may help reduce high cholesterol and regulate blood sugar levels, thus lowering your risk of heart disease and type-2 diabetes, according to the book “Human Metabolism: Functional Diversity and Integration.” High-fiber diets also make you feel full for longer periods of time, which may help you reduce your calorie consumption and lose excess weight.