

Diet and healthy bowels in adults

Introduction



It is important to eat meals regularly for bowel health and good metabolism. Food choices are also important to ensure healthy digestion and as part of the prevention or management of constipation and other bowel issues.

Metabolism is the word used to describe all the reactions in the body that change food into energy. A healthy metabolism will promote healthy weight, and overall wellbeing. Eating breakfast everyday and having regular meals will boost your metabolism and help your digestive system work properly.

What you eat is also important. The bowel needs both soluble and insoluble fibres to assist elimination and to stimulate normal soft bowel movements.

What is fibre and what does it do?

Fibre is the part of some foods, particularly fruit, vegetables and cereals, that the body cannot fully digest. It is also sometimes known as roughage. It helps to increase the size of stools, making them softer and easier to pass.

Some fibre is broken down by the bacteria that are found in the large bowel. The bacteria use the fibre to produce short chain fatty acids and gas. The short chain fatty acids provide energy for the cells of the large bowel. They also help reduce the risk of heart disease, raised cholesterol, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes and bowel cancer. That is another reason why it is important to have eat enough foods containing fibre.

Eating sufficient fibre may also help to control body weight and, as it requires more chewing, can increase the time taken to complete meals and help digestion. Short chain fatty acids may also help with weight management by controlling fat metabolism.

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How much fibre should I be eating?

While most people are not eating enough fibre, too much can cause abdominal pain and bloating. Most adults should try to eat about 30g of fibre each day. If you need to increase your fibre intake then do so gradually, otherwise you are more likely to experience abdominal pain and bloating.

As fibre draws water into the bowel, or keeps it there, it is important to make sure you are drinking enough water every day. Most adults need 1.5 – 2 litres a day, but you may need more than this if you are overweight, in a hot environment, or are very active. The general rule is to drink enough water-based drinks every day to ensure that your urine remains a pale straw colour.

Some people with certain bowel conditions may be advised to reduce the amount of fibre they eat. Always follow the advice of your healthcare professional.

What is the difference between soluble and insoluble fibre?

Many plants contain both soluble and insoluble fibres, but the amounts of these that different plants contain varies.

Soluble fibre dissolves in water. It absorbs water from the bowel and makes stools bigger and softer, which allows them to move more easily through the bowels. Oats, rye, barley, onions, leeks, root vegetables, apples and bananas all contain soluble fibre.

While soluble fibre can help with constipation, it is more likely to increase gas production than insoluble fibre and therefore may cause more bloating and discomfort for some people. However, it can be helpful for people with loose stools as it absorbs water.

Insoluble fibre does not dissolve in water. Insoluble fibre encourages water to pass into the bowel. Like soluble fibre, the extra water in the bowel makes stools bigger, softer and easier to pass. Wholegrain cereals, nuts, and seeds, leafy vegetables, green beans and potatoes with their skins are higher in insoluble fibre.

Insoluble fibre can help constipation but may make loose stools worse as it encourages water to move into the bowel. For most people a balance of both types of fibre is useful, which is why a varied diet is important. Beans and pulses contain both soluble and insoluble fibre.

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Which foods contain the most fibre?

Many different foods are high in fibre, including wholegrains such as many breakfast cereals, wholewheat pasta, wholegrain bread, oats, barley, rye, brown rice, fruits and vegetables, peas, beans and pulses, nuts and seeds, potatoes with their skins.

How can I increase the amount of fibre I eat?

If you eat five portions of fruit and vegetables each day and also chose wholegrain where possible (e.g. bread, pasta, rice) then you should be able to manage to have the recommended 30g per day. You could:

- Choose a wholegrain breakfast cereal such as a wholewheat biscuit cereal, muesli or porridge. Try adding some fresh fruit, dried fruit, seeds and/or nuts.
- Have wholemeal bread or bread with seeds in
- Have wholewheat pasta, bulgur wheat or brown rice.
- Eat potatoes with their skins, such as baked potato, potato wedges or boiled new potatoes – you can eat these hot or use for a salad
- Try fruit, vegetable sticks, rye crackers, oatcakes, unsalted nuts or seeds for your snacks
- Have vegetables with your meals, either as a side dish/salad or added to sauces, stews or curries. Try to have leafy vegetables such as kale and spinach regularly and consider mashing vegetables like swede, sweet potato or parsnip with mashed potatoes
- Add pulses like beans, lentils or chickpeas to soups, stews, curries and salads.

Other information about food

It is important to have a balanced diet. That means that foods containing protein, carbohydrates and fat as well as fibre, should be eaten in all meals.

Drink about 1.5 – 2 litres of water or water-based drinks a day. Avoid having too much caffeine, fizzy drinks and alcohol as these can cause problems for the bladder and bowel.

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It is particularly important to drink well if you are increasing the fibre content of your diet. The water is needed to help the fibre pass through the bowel easily.

Further information

Find more information about adult bladder and bowel health in our information library at www.bbuk.org.uk. You can also contact the [Bladder & Bowel UK confidential helpline](tel:01612144591) (0161 214 4591).

For further advice on bladder and bowel problems speak to your GP or other healthcare professional.
