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## Fibre in food

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## Summary

- Dietary fibre is found in the indigestible parts of cereals, fruits and vegetables.
- A diet high in fibre keeps the digestive system healthy.
- Most Australians don't eat enough fibre.

Dietary fibre is found in cereals, fruits and vegetables. Fibre is made up of the indigestible parts or compounds of plants, which pass relatively unchanged through our stomach and intestines. Fibre is mainly a carbohydrate. The main role of fibre is to keep the digestive system healthy.

Other terms for dietary fibre include 'bulk' and 'roughage', which can be misleading since some forms of fibre are water-soluble and aren't bulky or rough at all.

## Benefits of fibre

Dietary fibre is mainly needed to keep the digestive system healthy. It also contributes to other processes, such as stabilising glucose and cholesterol levels. In countries with traditionally high-fibre diets, diseases such as bowel cancer, diabetes and coronary heart disease are much less common than in Western countries.

Most Australians do not consume enough fibre. On average, most Australians consume 20–25 g of fibre daily. The Heart Foundation recommends that adults should aim to consume approximately 25–30 g daily.

Children aged between four and eight should consume 18 g of fibre each day. Girls aged 9 to 13, and 14 to 18 years, need 20 g and 22 g per day respectively. Boys aged 9 to 13, and 14 to 18 years, need 24 g and 28 g per day respectively.

Disorders that can arise from a low-fibre diet include:

- constipation
- irritable bowel syndrome
- diverticulitis
- heart disease
- some cancers.

## Types of fibre in food

There are two categories of fibre and we need to eat both in our daily diets, which are:

- soluble fibre – includes pectins, gums and mucilage, which are found mainly in plant cells. One of its major roles is to lower LDL (bad) cholesterol levels. Good sources of soluble fibre include fruits, vegetables, oat bran, barley, seed husks, flaxseed, psyllium, dried beans, lentils, peas, soy milk and soy products. Soluble fibre can also help with constipation.
- insoluble fibre – includes cellulose, hemicelluloses and lignin, which make up the structural parts of plant cell walls. A major role of insoluble fibre is to add bulk to faeces and to prevent constipation and associated problems such as haemorrhoids. Good sources include wheat bran, corn bran, rice bran, the skins of fruits and vegetables, nuts, seeds, dried beans and wholegrain foods.

Both types of fibre are beneficial to the body and most plant foods contain a mixture of both types.

## Resistant starch

Resistant starch, while not traditionally thought of as fibre, acts in a similar way. Resistant starch is the part of starchy food (approximately 10 per cent) that resists normal digestion in the small intestine. It is found in many unprocessed cereals and grains, unripe bananas, potatoes and lentils, and is added to bread and breakfast cereals as Hi-Maize. It can also be formed by cooking and manufacturing processes such as snap freezing.

Resistant starch is also important in bowel health. Bacteria in the large bowel ferment and change the resistant starch into short-chain fatty acids, which are important to bowel health and may protect against cancer. These fatty acids are also absorbed into the bloodstream and may play a role in lowering blood cholesterol levels.

## Fibre keeps the digestive tract healthy

The principal advantage of a diet high in fibre is in improving the health of the digestive system. The digestive system is lined with muscles that massage food along the tract from the moment a mouthful is swallowed until the eventual waste is passed out of the bowel (a process called peristalsis). Since fibre is relatively indigestible, it adds bulk to the faeces.

Soluble fibre soaks up water like a sponge, which helps to bulk out the faeces and allows it to pass through the gut more easily. It acts to slow down the rate of digestion. This slowing down effect is usually overridden by insoluble fibre, which does not absorb water and speeds up the time that food passes through the gut.

## Drink lots of water

A high-fibre diet may not prevent or cure constipation unless you drink enough water every day. Some very high-fibre breakfast cereals may have around 10g of fibre per serve, and if this cereal is not accompanied by enough fluid, it may cause abdominal discomfort or constipation.

## Fibre and ageing

Fibre is even more important for older people. The digestive system slows down with age, so a high-fibre diet becomes even more important.

## Lowering blood cholesterol

There is good evidence that soluble fibre reduces blood cholesterol levels. When blood cholesterol levels are high, fatty streaks and plaques are deposited along the walls of arteries. This can make them dangerously narrow and lead to an increased risk of coronary heart disease. It is thought that soluble fibre lowers blood cholesterol by binding bile acids (which are made from cholesterol to digest dietary fats) and then excreting them.

## Fibre and weight control

A high-fibre diet is protective against weight gain. High-fibre foods tend to have a lower energy density, which means they provide fewer kilojoules per gram of food. As a result, a person on a high-fibre diet can consume the same amount of food, but with fewer kilojoules (calories).

Fibrous foods are often bulky and, therefore, filling. Soluble fibre forms a gel that slows down the emptying of the stomach and the transit time of food through the digestive system. This extends the time a person feels satisfied or 'full'. It also delays the absorption of sugars from the intestines. This helps to maintain lower blood sugar levels and prevent a rapid rise in blood insulin levels, which has been linked with obesity and an increased risk of diabetes.

## Fibre and diabetes

For people with diabetes, eating a diet high in fibre slows glucose absorption from the small intestine into the blood. This reduces the possibility of a surge of insulin, the hormone produced by the pancreas to stabilise blood glucose levels.

## Conditions linked to low-fibre diets

Eating a diet low in fibre can contribute to many disorders, including:

- constipation – small, hard and dry faecal matter that is difficult to pass
- haemorrhoids – varicose veins of the anus
- diverticulitis – small hernias of the digestive tract caused by long-term constipation
- irritable bowel syndrome – pain, flatulence and bloating of the abdomen
- overweight and obesity – carrying too much body fat
- coronary heart disease – a narrowing of the arteries due to fatty deposits
- diabetes – a condition characterised by too much glucose in the blood
- colon cancer – cancer of the large intestine.

## Diet, cancer and heart disease

Increasing dietary fibre and wholegrain intake is likely to reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, weight gain and obesity, and possible overall mortality.

It is also very likely that these observed health benefits occur indirectly, through the protective effects of 'phytochemicals' (such as antioxidants) that are closely associated with the fibre components of fruits, vegetables and cereal foods.

Studies have shown that dietary fibre, cereal fibre and wholegrains are protective against colorectal cancer. Fibre is thought to decrease the risk of colorectal cancer by increasing stool bulk, diluting possible carcinogens present in the diet and decreasing transit time through the colon.

In addition, bacterial fermentation of fibre results in the production of short-chain fatty acids, which are thought to have protective effects against colorectal cancer. It is recognised that dietary fibre protects against colorectal cancer, each 10 g per day intake of total dietary fibre equates to a 10 per cent reduction in risk of colorectal cancer.

## Ways to increase your fibre intake

Simple suggestions for increasing your daily fibre intake include:

- Eat breakfast cereals that contain barley, wheat or oats.
- Switch to wholemeal or multigrain breads and brown rice.
- Add an extra vegetable to every evening meal.
- Snack on fruit, dried fruit, nuts or wholemeal crackers.

A daily intake of more than 30 g can be easily achieved if you eat wholegrain cereal products, more fruit, vegetables and legumes and, instead of low-fibre cakes and biscuits, have nuts or seeds as a snack or use in meals.

You do not need to eat many more kilojoules to increase your fibre intake. You can easily double your fibre intake without increasing your kilojoule intake by being more selective. Compare the tables below.

## Fibre intake of less than 20 g per day

	<b>Fibre (g)</b>	<b>Kilojoules (kJ)</b>
1 cup puffed rice cereal	0.4	444
4 slices white bread	3.0	1166
1 tablespoon peanut butter	2.7	610
1 piece of fruit (apple)	1.7	268
1/2 cup canned fruit, undrained	1.4	468
1/2 cup frozen mixed vegetables	4.3	102
Mashed potato 120 g	1.7	336
1 cup white cooked rice	1.0	999
2 plain dry biscuits	0.4	150
1 slice plain cake 60 g	0.6	643
1 cup commercial fruit juice	0.8	391
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>17.9 g</b>	<b>5,557 kJ</b>

### Fibre intake of more than 30 g per day

	<b>Fibre (g)</b>	<b>Kilojoules (kJ)</b>
2 wholewheat cereal biscuits (for example Weetbix or Vita Brits)	3.2	398
4 slices wholegrain bread	5.7	1085
1 tablespoon peanut butter	2.7	610
2 pieces of fruit (apple & pear)	4.9	515
1 cup frozen mixed vegetables	8.6	203
1 small boiled potato with skin, 100 g	2.8	338
1 cup white cooked spaghetti	2.5	696
2 wholemeal dry biscuits	1.5	209
25 almonds	3.0	852
1 cup whole fruit juice	0.5	362
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>35.4 g</b>	<b>5,118 kJ</b>

### A sudden increase in dietary fibre

A sudden switch from a low-fibre diet to a high-fibre diet can create some abdominal pain and increased flatulence (wind). Also, very high-fibre diets (more than 40 g daily) are linked with decreased absorption of some important minerals such as iron, zinc and calcium. This occurs when fibre binds these minerals and forms insoluble salts, which are then excreted.

This could increase the risk of developing deficiencies of these minerals in susceptible people. Adults should aim for a diet that contains 25 g to 30 g of fibre per day, and should introduce fibre into the diet gradually to avoid any negative outcomes.

It is better to add fibre to the diet from food sources rather than from fibre supplements, as these can aggravate constipation, especially if you do not increase the amount of water you drink daily.

### Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Dietitians Association of Australia Tel. 1800 812 942

### Things to remember

- Dietary fibre is found in the indigestible parts of cereals, fruits and vegetables.
- A diet high in fibre keeps the digestive system healthy.
- Most Australians don't eat enough fibre.

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[Reporter Flip Shelton takes us on a tour and shows us what fresh produce is available at a local market...](#)

- [Food to have sometimes](#)

[Junk food should be kept to a minimum. It usually contains a lot of fat, salt or sugar...](#)

- [Food variety and a healthy diet](#)

[If you eat a variety of good food, your diet will provide you with adequate nutrition...](#)

- [Healthy budget - tucker talk tips](#)

[You can buy more food if you spend most of your money on basic healthy foods like bread, cereals, fruit and vegies...](#)

- [Healthy cooking tips](#)

[Eating healthy food doesn't mean giving up your favourite foods and switching to eating only salads...](#)

- [Healthy eating tips](#)

[A good balance between exercise and food intake is important to maintain a healthy body weight...](#)

- [How to cut down on salt \(slideshow\)](#)

[Even if you are careful about the salt you consume, you may be surprised that some of the food you eat contains hidden salt that you're not even aware of. Learn how to cut down on salt...](#)

- [Lunch at work](#)

[Did you know lunch is just as important as breakfast? In other words, don't skip lunch: you need it every day! A nutritious lunch will give you the energy to get through an afternoon of work...](#)

- [Lunch - avoid the fast food fix \(video\)](#)

[Nutritionist Shane Bilsborough shows us how much energy it takes to burn off a fast food lunch. Join tradies, Corky and Danny as they find out how to maintain a healthy weight...](#)

- [Lunch boxes - healthy shopping ideas \(video\)](#)

[Victorian State Public Health Nutritionist Veronica Graham takes us shopping for the right foods to include in your child's lunchbox...](#)

- [Lunch boxes - how to make them healthy \(video\)](#)

[Victorian State Public Health Nutritionist Veronica Graham shares three healthy and delicious lunchbox examples for the kids and provides some great food preparation tips to save you time throughout...](#)

- [Reading food labels - tucker talk tips](#)

[Labels on packaged food can give you useful information about the nutrition, ingredients, storage and weight of the food. Add full stop to pull quote...](#)

- [Shopping at fresh food markets \(video\)](#)

[Victorian State Nutritionist, Veronica Graham talks about the benefits of shopping at fresh produce markets...](#)

- [Tips to keep our snacks on track \(slideshow\)](#)

[Most of us are prone to the odd snack or two. Check out these simple tips to keep your snacks on track...](#)

### **Food safety and storage**

- [Avoid food poisoning - Cook Safe \(video\)](#)

[Learn how to prepare and cook food safely at home...](#)

- [Avoid food poisoning - Shop Safe \(video\)](#)

[Learn how to keep your hot and cold foods separate and shop safely for food...](#)

- [Avoid food poisoning - Store Safe \(video\)](#)

[Learn how to store food safely in your fridge at home...](#)

- [Be savvy with food this summer \(slideshow\)](#)

[How to keep food fresh and safe in warmer weather...](#)

- [Cockroaches](#)

[Cockroaches prefer to live in kitchens and other food preparation areas, so they can feed off food spills...](#)

- [Don't let food poisoning ruin your summer \(slideshow\)](#)

[How to avoid food poisoning this summer...](#)

- [Eggs](#)

[The humble egg is a powerhouse of nutritional goodness. Eggs are full of things your body needs. They are a great source of protein, antioxidants, vitamins and minerals \(such as vitamin A, vitamin D...](#)

- [Emergencies - coping without gas or electricity](#)

[In a gas or electricity blackout you may have to think laterally to come up with ways to continue bathing, eating and keeping warm...](#)

- [Fishing - eat your catch with care](#)

[People who fish in the Lower Yarra and Maribymong rivers need to be careful about eating their catch because of the risk of chemical exposure...](#)

- [Food poisoning - listeria](#)

[Listeria infection is uncommon but very dangerous for the elderly, people whose immune systems are not working properly and pregnant women and their unborn babies...](#)

- [Food poisoning - prevention](#)

[You can minimise the risk of food poisoning by taking simple precautions...](#)

- [Food safety and storage](#)

[High-risk food should be kept at 5 °C or below, and above 60 °C to avoid the temperature danger zone and food poisoning...](#)

- [Food safety - eggs](#)

[To enjoy eggs safely - buy clean, keep cool and cook well...](#)

- [Food safety for summer celebrations \(video\)](#)

[In the hot weather there is a higher risk of food poisoning but if you follow some simple rules when you prepare, handle and store food it will significantly reduce your risk of getting sick...](#)

- [Food safety outdoors](#)

[Food poisoning is a real risk when taking food outside the home, especially in warmer weather...](#)

- [Food safety when cooking](#)

[Most foods should be cooked to at least 75 °C to minimise the risk of food poisoning...](#)

- [Food safety when eating out](#)

[If you have any doubt about the safety of food when you're out, don't eat it...](#)

- [Food safety when shopping](#)

[When you shop, choose, pack and transport food carefully...](#)

- [Food Standards Australia New Zealand \(FSANZ\)](#)

[FSANZ's role is to protect the health and safety of people in Australia and New Zealand by maintaining a safe food supply...](#)

- [Food – use-by and best-before dates](#)

[Check the 'use-by' or 'best before' date when you buy food...](#)

## **Dieting and diets**

- [10 tips on how to eat more calcium](#)

[Reduce your intake of coffee, alcohol and soft drinks... 10 tips on how to eat more calcium...](#)

- [Body image and diets](#)

[Some people diet because they have a poor body image, not because they want to be a healthy weight...](#)

- [Dairy and dairy alternatives](#)

[Dairy products \(and dairy alternatives\) are packed with calcium, protein and lots of other essential nutrients. Calcium is vital for healthy teeth and bones. It is also important for your muscles...](#)

- [Food allergy and intolerance](#)

[Food allergy is an immune response, while food intolerance is a chemical reaction...](#)

- [Food for sport - tucker talk tips](#)

[Carbohydrate is the most important nutrient for athletes...](#)

- [Getting enough protein](#)

[Protein is an important nutrient that helps your body grow and repair cells. Most Australians eat more than enough protein, but if you are vegetarian or vegan you may not be getting enough protein \(or...](#)

- [Gluten-free diet](#)

[Gluten sensitivity can be managed with a gluten-free diet...](#)

- [Heart disease and food](#)

[A diet low in saturated fats and high in fibre and plant foods can substantially reduce your risk of developing heart disease...](#)

- [How to cut down on salt \(slideshow\)](#)

[Even if you are careful about the salt you consume, you may be surprised that some of the food you eat contains hidden salt that you're not even aware of. Learn how to cut down on salt...](#)

- [Mood and food](#)

[Your mood can affect your food choices, and your food choices may affect your mood...](#)

- [Simple ways to cut down on fat \(slideshow\)](#)

[Cutting down on fat is not as hard as you think. Here's how to maintain a healthy weight by consuming the right amount and types of fat...](#)

- [Sporting performance and food](#)

[Good nutrition and a healthy diet are essential to improving your sports performance...](#)

- [Tips to keep our snacks on track \(slideshow\)](#)  
[Most of us are prone to the odd snack or two. Check out these simple tips to keep your snacks on track...](#)
- [Vegetarian and vegan eating](#)  
[A well-planned vegetarian or vegan diet can meet nutritional needs during all stages of life...](#)
- [Vegetarian diets and children](#)  
[Children can eat a vegetarian diet and stay healthy as long as their extra nutritional needs are met...](#)
- [Weight loss and fad diets](#)  
[With a balanced eating plan, it's what you leave in that makes all the difference...](#)
- [Weight management services](#)  
[Always consult with your doctor before choosing any weight management service...](#)
- [Women's nutrition for life](#)  
['Nutrition for life' identifies a woman's four main life stages and how to eat healthily for each of them. Following this information can lead to better health at any stage of your life...](#)

#### **Nutritional needs throughout life**

- [Women's nutrition for life](#)  
['Nutrition for life' identifies a woman's four main life stages and how to eat healthily for each of them. Following this information can lead to better health at any stage of your life...](#)
- [Bottle feeding - nutrition and safety](#)  
[Breastmilk or commercial infant formula is necessary for all babies less than 12 months...](#)
- [Breastfeeding and your diet](#)  
[Breastfeeding women need to eat regularly and include a wide variety of healthy foods in their diet...](#)
- [Childcare and healthy eating](#)  
[Childcare centres should provide healthy meals for your children...](#)
- [Dairy and dairy alternatives](#)  
[Dairy products \(and dairy alternatives\) are packed with calcium, protein and lots of other essential nutrients. Calcium is vital for healthy teeth and bones. It is also important for your muscles...](#)
- [Disability - managing underweight](#)  
[There are a number of ways that a person with a disability can successfully avoid unwanted weight loss...](#)
- [Eating tips for babies](#)  
[First foods for babies can be prepared easily and cheaply at home without salt, seasonings and sweeteners...](#)
- [Eating tips for children \(3\) - older toddlers](#)  
[Offer children the same foods as the family, with a variety of textures and flavours for balanced nutrition...](#)
- [Eating tips for preschoolers](#)  
[Children are able to decide how much food they need for activity and growth if allowed to eat according to their appetite...](#)
- [Eating tips for school children](#)  
[Snacks are an important part of a healthy diet for active children, so offer nutritious as well as high energy snacks...](#)
- [Eating tips for young toddlers](#)  
[Children have a natural ability to sense when they are hungry and when they are full...](#)
- [Eggs](#)  
[The humble egg is a powerhouse of nutritional goodness. Eggs are full of things your body needs. They are a great source of protein, antioxidants, vitamins and minerals \(such as vitamin A, vitamin D...](#)
- [Food and your life stages](#)  
[The nutritional requirements of the human body change as we move through different life stages...](#)

- [Food for babies - tucker talk tips](#)  
[Before six months, breastmilk or formula is the only food and drink that your baby needs...](#)
- [Getting enough protein](#)  
[Protein is an important nutrient that helps your body grow and repair cells. Most Australians eat more than enough protein, but if you are vegetarian or vegan you may not be getting enough protein \(or...](#)
- [Good food for Elders - tucker talk tips](#)  
[Good nutrition, a healthy diet and physical activity can help Elders prevent or manage health problems...](#)
- [Healthy active Koori kids - tucker talk tips](#)  
[Good nutrition and physical exercise help to keep Koori kids healthy and avoid diseases when they get older...](#)
- [Healthy budget - tucker talk tips](#)  
[You can buy more food if you spend most of your money on basic healthy foods like bread, cereals, fruit and vegies...](#)
- [Healthy eating during pregnancy - tucker talk tips](#)  
[Some foods should be avoided during pregnancy as they carry bacteria that could harm your unborn baby...](#)
- [Healthy eating for adolescent girls](#)  
[Eating healthy food is important at any age, but it's especially important for teenagers...](#)
- [Healthy eating for women in midlife](#)  
[As you get older you need fewer calories, but your need for other nutrients remains unchanged. Healthy...](#)
- [Healthy eating for women in their later years](#)  
[Being well nourished improves women's mental and physical health and quality of life at all life stages...](#)
- [Healthy eating for young women](#)  
[Good nutrition is especially important during this stage of your life when there is so much happening: independent living, career development, travel, establishing relationships, babies and families...](#)
- [Lunch at work](#)  
[Did you know lunch is just as important as breakfast? In other words, don't skip lunch: you need it every day! A nutritious lunch will give you the energy to get through an afternoon of work...](#)
- [Nutrition needs when you're over 65](#)  
[Nutrition needs vary with age and gender. Now you're older, the foods and drinks that make up a healthy diet may need to be slightly different from when you were younger. In general, you&...](#)

## Related Information

- [Nutrition Week](#)  
Nutrition Week...
- [Fats and oils](#)  
Animal products and processed foods like fried fast food are generally high in saturated fats...
- [Sugar](#)  
Too much sugar in the diet can contribute to health problems, so limit foods and drinks with high amounts of added sugar...
- [Adhesions](#)  
Adhesions may have no signs or symptoms, or they may cause pain by pulling on nerves...
- [Milk](#)  
Milk is an excellent source of vitamins and minerals, particularly calcium...

[Home](#)

## Related information on other websites

- [Dietitians Association of Australia](#)
- [Maintaining a healthy digestive system – Gastroenterological Society of Australia](#)
- [Nutrition Australia](#)

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