



Foods for Health: Eating for Digestive Health



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Did you know certain foods and beverages may have digestive health benefits? Before your body can get these benefits from foods and drinks, it must break them down into smaller components that the body can absorb. The digestive system is designed to help the body with this process. Additionally, the foods and beverages that we consume also impact the way our digestive system works.

Digestive System Basics

The digestive system includes all the parts of the body that help us chew, swallow and digest food. Nutrients including carbohydrates, fats, protein, vitamins and minerals are broken down and absorbed into the blood via the mouth, stomach, intestines and other digestive tract organs. The body uses these nutrients to build and nourish cells and to provide energy to fuel other body processes.

When the body is stressed, difficulties in the digestive tract can occur. Many factors, including poor diet, travel, hormonal changes and side effects of medications or other health problems contribute to this stress. Making smart dietary choices and fitting in regular physical activity can help address these issues and promote digestive health.

Fiber and Fluids

Fiber has the important role of helping to sweep all unused and unwanted digestion byproducts through the intestinal tract. Fiber truly is “nature’s broom” – it helps keep your insides nice and clean!

Insoluble fiber, sometimes called roughage or bulk, is found in almost all plant foods. This type of fiber includes the parts of fruits, vegetables and whole grains that your body cannot digest or absorb. Another type of fiber, known as soluble fiber, helps slow digestion by attracting water. Soluble fiber, found, for example, in peas and beans, can be used by good bacteria in the digestive tract to increase their number and strength. It also assists in producing other beneficial “digestive helpers” such as short chain fatty acids.

Fiber is a nutrient of concern in many American diets as most are not meeting recommendations. Women 14-50 years of age should eat at least 25 grams of fiber each day, while men should aim for 38 grams.

Gradually introduce fiber into your diet to avoid symptoms of bloating or discomfort. Gradual introduction can help regulate bowel movements as well as manage weight, blood glucose and cholesterol levels.

Fluids work with fiber to move things along. A diet high in foods like fruits and vegetables, which are both high in fiber and provide water, can help keep your stool soft and easy to pass.



Fitting Fiber In

Fiber-rich whole grain products, nuts, legumes, fruits and vegetables are often good sources of fiber. Many breakfast cereals have at least three grams of fiber per serving, and fruits and vegetables typically contain three or more grams of fiber. Beans and legumes can have six to 15 grams of fiber per serving.

Certain foods and beverages, including some yogurts, cereals and nutrition bars have been fortified with fiber to help increase intake and meet recommendations. Include these foods as part of a balanced diet in addition to fruits and vegetables.

Adding More Fiber to Your Day

- Fill half your plate with fruits or vegetables. Split the other half between lean meats and whole grains.
- Eat salad with meals and have fruit for dessert.
- Add cooked veggies and beans to soups, stews or whole wheat pasta dishes.
- Bulk up your fiber intake at breakfast by pairing whole-grain cereals with fruits like strawberries, blueberries or sliced peaches.
- Raw fruits, sliced veggies, air-popped popcorn and nuts are good low-fat, high-fiber snacks.

Picking Up Probiotics

Trillions of bacteria naturally reside in our digestive system. The health of the digestive system benefits from the right balance of bacteria which help the body break down and absorb nutrients and may help promote immune and overall health.

A probiotic is a live culture that, when eaten in sufficient amounts, has certain health benefits. Research indicates that regularly consuming foods, beverages and/or supplements containing certain types of probiotics, also known as “good bacteria,” helps maintain good digestive health. Probiotics can be found in a variety of fermented foods, including certain yogurts, cheeses and kefir. Store probiotics in the refrigerator or a cool, dark place to maintain viability.

Not all probiotics are the same - the benefits are specific to certain types and strains of probiotic bacteria. Some probiotics may provide a digestive health benefit while others may provide a benefit specific to immune health. Research is still evolving regarding the types of bacteria and strains that best maintain optimal digestive health.

Different types and strains of bacteria require different amounts to be effective. Most research has found positive health effects when probiotics are consumed at levels above 100 million (10⁸) colony-forming units (cfu) on a daily basis. Look for the *Live & Active Cultures* seal to help you recognize products containing this amount. Some may require higher doses to be effective - contact your health professional for help in finding probiotic foods and supplements that are right for you.

Ten Tips for Good Digestion

1. **Consume a Balanced Diet.** Choose a variety of foods from each food group, especially fiber-rich fruits, vegetables and grains as well as certain yogurts and fluids.
2. **Establish an Eating “Routine.”** Eat regular meals to help promote consistent bowel movements.
3. **Eat Small, More Frequent Meals.** Aim for 4-5 small meals per day versus 2-3 large meals.
4. **Chew More.** Digestion starts in the mouth. Chew thoroughly. Chewing can help with the needed breakdown of some nutrients.
5. **Remember a Mealtime Beverage.** Fluids help move solids through the digestive system.
6. **Make Half Your Plate Fruits and Veggies.** Fiber-rich fruits and vegetables can also provide prebiotics that support the growth of good bacteria in the digestive tract.
7. **Eat Yogurt or Kefir Daily.** Certain yogurts and kefir contain probiotics that can help promote digestion.
8. **Relax After Eating.** Give your body time to digest your meal before being active again.
9. **Avoid Overeating.** Excessive intake can burden the digestive system.
10. **Get Moving.** Focus on fitting physical activity into your day to help promote digestive health. Even slow activities like stretching and walking will promote good digestive health.



What Are Prebiotics?

Food ingredients that help probiotics stay alive and active are known as prebiotics. Some prebiotics occur naturally in foods such as leeks, asparagus, chicory, garlic, artichoke, onion, wheat, oats and soybeans while others like yogurts, cereals, breads, biscuits and dietary supplements may be fortified with prebiotics. Together, probiotics and prebiotics can create a friendly environment to support overall digestive function.

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Learn more about “Foods for Health: Eating for Digestive Health” by watching our video with nutrition expert and author, David Grotto, RD.

www.foodinsight.org

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