- Food—fiber content

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IN FOCUS

Fibre

Why is fibre important and how much do we actually need? **Emma Bardwell** explains why it is the unsung hero of the nutrition world

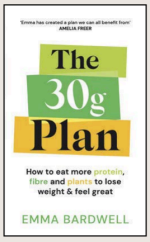
According to UK government guidelines, adults should be aiming for around 30g of fibre a day. In the UK, the average person's fibre intake is around 18g and, in the US, it's only 16g a day. Despite being easy to access, it's clear most of us are woefully under-eating fibre, which is crazy, as it has an impressive list of benefits, one of which is helping with weight management.

Fibre-rich foods tend to be bulky, which has the effect of physically filling our stomachs up. Your stomach has stretch receptors which, when triggered, send satiety hormones like GLP-1 (the same as found in weight-loss injections, such as Mounjaro, Wegovy and Ozempic) to your brain to say 'stop eating: you've had enough'. Fibre also slows the rate at which food leaves the stomach, which keeps us fuller for longer, and helps stabilise blood sugar levels, in turn helping to keep our mood and energy more stable. But fibre's impressive CV doesn't end there. It has also been shown to help lower LDL cholesterol and reduce the risk of heart disease, stroke, diabetes, obesity and some cancers.

And a special heads up for all the carb shunners out there: fibre is actually a type of carbohydrate. That's right! Just one of the many reasons not to deny or fear carbs, as they play a critical role in our health and do not cause weight gain.

More than good for the gut

In the past, we thought of fibre as simply being good for keeping bowel habits regular, which it does brilliantly, but we now know, along with all the other benefits already mentioned, that it plays a critical role in feeding our gut microbiota too. These bacteria work synergistically inside us, breaking down indigestible fibres from food that we



This is an extract from The 30g Plan by Emma Bardwell, published by Vermilion (£16.99).



eat and turning them into beneficial compounds called short-chain fatty acids (SCFAs).

Types of fibre

Fibre is what's known as a complex carbohydrate and it's only found in plants. However, not all fibre is the same. There are many different types – maybe more than a hundred – but to keep things simple I'm going to concentrate on just two: soluble and insoluble fibre.

When mixed with water, soluble fibre forms a gel-like consistency, which is why it's sometimes referred to as viscous fibre. It acts like a sponge and helps sweep cholesterol out of your intestinal tract. Good sources include oats, beans, lentils, bananas, figs and pears. Soluble fibre is especially good for slowing the rate that food leaves your stomach, which can be helpful for keeping you feeling full, managing appetite and regulating blood glucose.

Resistant starch is actually a type of soluble fibre, but deserves a special mention as some studies show it can increase feelings of fullness, improve insulin sensitivity and reduce appetite. Resistant starch appears to be particularly attractive to certain gut microbes, which means they thrive when it's included in your diet.

Not only is it found in green bananas, oats and most types of beans, cooking then cooling and re-heating appears to increase levels of resistant starch in foods such as rice, potatoes, pasta and bread.

When it comes to insoluble fibre, our bodies can't completely break it down. Instead, it passes undigested through our gut, bulking up our poo, keeping us going to the toilet regularly and helping to excrete waste matter. Good examples include cauliflower, oat bran, green beans, celery, nuts and seeds.

Insoluble fibre is particularly prevalent in the skins of fruit and vegetables, so if you can get away without peeling potatoes, parsnips and carrots, please do so.

Start to prioritise fibre in your diet and you'll soon see the benefits!





YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

What plant-based foods are good for reaching 30g fibre a day?

All plant foods contain fibre – fruit, veg, nuts, seeds and legumes like chickpeas and lentils are all great additions to bump up dietary fibre.

Berries like raspberries and blackberries are a particularly good source of fibre, boasting around 4g per 100g (around a cupped handful). Half a tin of chickpeas will give you a whopping 8.5g of fibre – if your budget allows, look for ones that come in glass jars as they're much bigger, softer and more delicious. My final tip is to check out high-fibre pasta options. Most supermarkets offer them now: look for edamame or lentil versions, which can have up to 18g of fibre per 75g serving. My favourite is Explore Cuisine's Edamame & Mung Bean Fettuccine. For budget friendly fibre-packed foods, don't forget good old frozen peas, pears and oats.



How can we tell if shop-bought bread is high fibre?

It's actually pretty easy, just look at the label and see how much fibre the bread contains per 100g. If it's 6g or more, it's classed as high fibre.



Is it true that fibre can cause bloating and wind?

It can definitely create some windy side effects, but don't forget farting is normal – we all pass wind up 15-25 times a day, it's just that most of us don't shout about it. Of course, this can be unfavourable and we really want to minimise smelly gas or uncomfortable bloating as much as possible. In fact, persistent bloating that occurs regularly or which lasts more than 3 weeks really should be investigated by your GP, just to rule out anything serious.

For occasional bloating, there's lots you can do. Eat slowly and chew really well, avoid sitting around in tight jeans, take a 'fart walk' after meals to help digestion. Taking a peppermint oil capsule before a big meal can help relax muscles in the digestive tract, which can ease cramps and bloating, especially in people with IBS. Most importantly, try to increase fibre gradually – you don't want to go from 16g to 30g overnight. And work with your body to help it adapt. If beans are a trigger for you, rather than excluding them altogether, try introducing just a tablespoon a day for 1-2 weeks before increasing further. Remember, too, that bloating and farting is often related to your gut microbes fermenting fibre and creating really beneficial compounds such as short chain fatty acids, which have been shown to have a huge array of benefits... so a bit of wind is not always a bad thing!



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