- Food—fiber content



Find out why fibre is the forgotten hero when it comes to turbocharging your health and wellbeing.

BY ZOE MEUNIER

Friendly FIBRE

Amid all the protein praise and biohacking hype, one incredibly important dietary component often gets pushed to the wayside – fibre. When most of us think about fibre, we picture the classic orange drink that promises to "sweep" us clean, but that's an outdated view. Fibre is so much more than a quick fix for constipation – it's one of the most important nutrients in our diet, packed with health benefits that extend far beyond the gut.

Dr Will Bulsiewicz (aka Dr B), a renowned gastroenterologist and author of *Fibre Fuelled*, is on a mission to reframe the way we think about fibre. "Fibre is this exciting, magical substance we're learning so much about," he says. "It's a complex carbohydrate, made up of chains of sugars, but our body can't digest it. Instead, it passes through our intestines, eventually making its way to the colon, where the real magic happens." ►

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FUEL UP ON FIBRE

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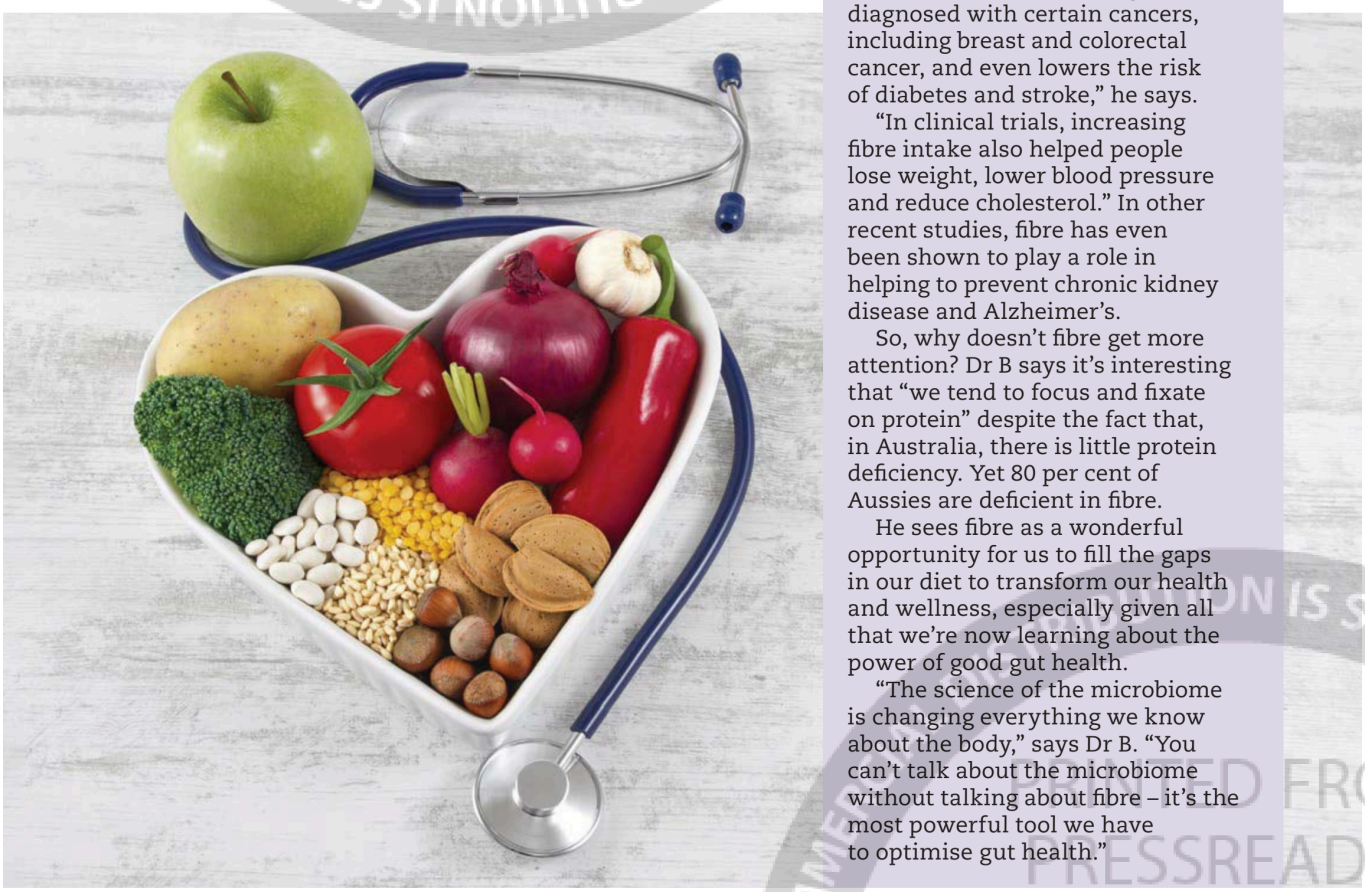
Here's the surprising part: our body doesn't break down fibre – our gut microbiome does. That is, the trillions of microbes that dwell in our digestive system. "As humans, we don't have the enzymes to break it down, and so we basically outsourced the enzymes to our microbiome," explains Dr B. Over time, as humans adapted to different ecosystems and food supplies, our gut microbes became essential to processing our fibre, due to their ability to adapt and change, providing tens of thousands of enzymes. "These microbes group together and break down fibre into short-chain fatty acids," says Dr B. These fatty acids – the three main ones being acetate, propionate and butyrate – are powerful, bioactive compounds that can change our physiology – in our gut, our immune system, our metabolism and brain. Dr B adds: "This is the most anti-inflammatory thing I've come across in my 20 years of studying medicine."



Fibre's superhero status

It's easy to see why fibre is the unsung hero of nutrition. A potent force that plays a major role in everything from reducing inflammation to supporting a healthy gut, it's also an expert at helping to lower your risk of chronic diseases. Dr B points to a groundbreaking study by Professor Andrew Reynolds that reveals just how impactful fibre is on overall health.

"Eating more fibre makes you less likely to have a heart attack or heart disease, less likely to be diagnosed with certain cancers, including breast and colorectal cancer, and even lowers the risk of diabetes and stroke," he says.

"In clinical trials, increasing fibre intake also helped people lose weight, lower blood pressure and reduce cholesterol." In other recent studies, fibre has even been shown to play a role in helping to prevent chronic kidney disease and Alzheimer's.

So, why doesn't fibre get more attention? Dr B says it's interesting that "we tend to focus and fixate on protein" despite the fact that, in Australia, there is little protein deficiency. Yet 80 per cent of Aussies are deficient in fibre.

He sees fibre as a wonderful opportunity for us to fill the gaps in our diet to transform our health and wellness, especially given all that we're now learning about the power of good gut health.

"The science of the microbiome is changing everything we know about the body," says Dr B. "You can't talk about the microbiome without talking about fibre – it's the most powerful tool we have to optimise gut health."

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FIBRE'S ROLE IN WEIGHT LOSS



For those of us who are working towards shedding kilos, fibre should be an essential inclusion in our arsenal. With GLP-1 medications like semaglutide currently all the rage in weight loss, Dr B explains that fibre can work in a similar, though gentler, way. "Those short-chain fatty acids work on the cells that line the gut to release hormones, including GLP-1 and a satiety hormone called peptide YY – telling your body when it's full," he explains. "There's a very interesting study by Dr Kevin Hall of the National Institutes of Health, which found that people eating ultra-processed food consumed hundreds of extra calories a day compared with those eating the same calories and macros in unprocessed foods. Fibre helps activate those satiety hormones, helping you feel full and satisfied."

THE RAINBOW CONNECTION

There are two main types of fibre: soluble and insoluble. Insoluble fibre is the roughage that sweeps through the digestive tract, while soluble fibre – almost all of which is prebiotic – dissolves in water and becomes food for your microbiome, helping to produce those short-chain fatty acids that are so critical to health.

For most of us, focusing on variety, rather than obsessing over specific amounts and types, is the best way to go. "The fibre in different plants varies – an apple's fibre is different from oats, for example," says Dr B. "But if you eat a variety of plant-based foods, nature will balance things out for you. Don't worry about getting the 'right' type of fibre – just eat the rainbow." ►



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Get wise on wheat

Adding fibre to your daily diet just got a whole lot easier – and tastier – following the recent launch of Wise Wheat, a naturally high-in-fibre flour used to make loaves and rolls (available in Woolworths). The first of its kind, this high-fibre wheat variety was developed over several years by Australia's national science agency CSIRO and French farmer-led cooperative Limagrain. Grown in Australia, the groundbreaking wheat is high in amylose, resulting in flour that contains six times more fibre than regular wheat flour. This means even smooth white bread packs a gut-friendly, prebiotic fibre punch. It's also available in a 'seeds & grains' variety, which delivers even more fibre.

LEADING DIETITIAN DR JOANNA MCMILLAN (BELOW), who has launched Wise Wheat in collaboration with Allied Pinnacle, says: "Fibre is crucial for our overall health. Wise Wheat products are naturally high in prebiotic fibre, contributing to good gut health. It's the natural choice for Australians wanting to boost their fibre intake with no compromise on taste."



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THE LOW AND SLOW APPROACH

For those with digestive issues, such as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), the idea of increasing fibre intake can feel daunting. Dr B advises a gradual approach: "Start low and go slow. Introduce fibre into your diet little by little and allow your gut time to adapt." He also recommends considering a low-FODMAP diet, which includes fibre-rich foods that are gentle on the digestive system. And for those who need extra support, fibre supplements – especially those formulated to be low FODMAP like the ones Dr B has created (38Tera Daily Microbiome Nutrition; 38tera.com) – can be a great option to help bridge the gap.

On the regular

Speaking of digestive issues, let's go back to fibre's famous role in keeping us regular. The topic of constipation isn't glamorous, but it's an uncomfortable reality for many of us. And, as Dr B explains, many more of us are constipated without even realising it, unaware that constipation isn't about frequency, but about adequacy. "It's not about how often you go to the bathroom," he says. "It's about whether or not you fully empty your colon."

If you go several times a day, but each time feels incomplete, you may still be suffering from constipation. The good news? For many with mild constipation, increasing fibre intake, drinking more water and getting moving can help you find relief. However, Dr B warns that for those with moderate to severe constipation, fibre alone may not be enough – and could exacerbate the issue to start with. "If you crank up your fibre, but then you don't poop, that fibre may become stuck, fermenting and producing gas, making the issue worse," he explains. A more comprehensive approach, including the use of laxatives, may be necessary initially to get things moving, before ramping up fibre intake.



Fibre's glow-up

In the end, the key to optimising your fibre intake is simple. Rather than worrying about how many grams of fibre you're eating, just "eat a wide variety of plant-based foods, and you'll naturally get the fibre you need," Dr B advises. Whether you love avocados, oats or berries, fibre is there to support your health and help you feel your best.

"Fibre is sexy!" he exclaims. "If we focus on variety and enjoy our food, we can transform our health – and we don't have to be afraid of fibre anymore." So, the next time you reach for a meal, remember: Fibre is not only keeping you regular, but it's also working its magic on your heart, gut, brain and metabolism. It's time to give this nutritional powerhouse the attention it deserves.

Dr Will Bulsiewicz (aka Dr B) is an award-winning gastroenterologist and a leading authority on gut health. He's the bestselling author of *Fibre Fuelled* and *The Fibre Fuelled Cookbook*, and founder of gut health supplement company 38TERA. Find him on Instagram and Facebook (@theguthealthmd), TikTok (@theguthealthmd_) and online at theplantfedgut.com.