

Nutrition Needs for Older Adults: Fiber



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Introduction

Fiber is a type of carbohydrate that the body is unable to digest. Fiber plays an important role in the health of older adults. It is involved with healthy digestion, feeling full, and preventing constipation¹. Fiber also plays a role in reducing the risk of heart disease, diabetes, and some cancers². Fiber has even been shown to reduce inflammation in the body³.

Ninety-five percent of adults do not consume adequate fiber in their diets². The good news is that fiber is found in a wide variety of plant-based foods, including fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes, nuts, and seeds. Eating a balanced and varied diet can help older adults meet their fiber needs.

How Much is Needed?

Older adults need slightly less fiber than younger adults. Men require more fiber than women.

The Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) is based on the amount of fiber needed for protection against heart disease¹.

It's important to get the right amount of fiber. Too little can cause constipation and increase risk of certain chronic diseases. Too much, especially if increasing the amount of fiber in the diet too quickly, can cause gastrointestinal issues, including bloating, gas, and cramping¹.

Adequate Intake (AI) for Fiber⁴:

Life Stage Group	Men	Women
31-50 years	38 grams	25 grams
51-70 years	30 grams	21 grams
71+ years	30 grams	21 grams

Food Sources of Fiber

Fiber is found in a wide variety of plant-based foods, like fruits and vegetables. Whole grains are a good source of fiber, but fiber content is reduced when grains are processed (e.g., refined grains, such as white bread).

Food Sources of Fiber⁴

Food source	Amount per serving	Grams per serving
Chickpeas	0.5 cup	11
Black beans	0.5 cup	7
Almonds	0.3 cup	6
Quinoa (cooked)	1 cup	5
Broccoli	1 cup	5
Oatmeal (cooked)	1 cup	4
Apple	1 medium	4
Banana	1 medium	3
Whole wheat bread	1 slice	2
Brown rice	0.5 cup	2
Cabbage (raw)	1 cup	2
Shelled pumpkin seeds	1 ounce	2

Some older adults are not able to get adequate fiber through food alone. Supplementation (e.g., psyllium or methylcellulose) may be needed for these individuals. It is important that older adults work with their health care team to determine whether supplementation is needed.

Strategies to Help Older Adults Optimize Intake Daily

The following strategies can help older adults optimize their intake of fiber:

When Shopping:

- Purchase foods naturally high in fiber, like fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole grains
- Read food labels for fiber content

During Meal Preparation:

- Incorporate plant-based food options into meal planning
- Add vegetables or salad with lunch or dinner
- Prepare whole grains more often than refined grains

At the Table:

- Serve cooked and/or chopped vegetables for older adults with difficulty chewing
- Offer fruits and vegetables as snacks throughout the day



TAKE HOME MESSAGE:

Fiber is an important nutrient for older adults. It helps prevent constipation and plays an important role in heart health. Many people do not eat enough fiber. Incorporating more plant-based foods into a balanced, varied diet is a good way to help older adults meet their fiber needs.

REFERENCES

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3. Nielsen SJ, Trak-Fellermeier MA, Joshipura K. The Association between Dietary Fiber Intake and CRP levels, US Adults, 2007–2010. *The FASEB Journal*. 2017 Apr;31(1_supplement):648-8.
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