



# FIBRE

## Why Women should Eat More!

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Eating a diet that contains plenty of fibre is important for keeping the digestive system in good working order. More recently, we have begun to understand that fibre has a much broader role and that it holds some particular, unique benefits for women's health. In this article, **Angie Jefferson** explores fibre in women's health, and why we should all be eating more.

**T**raditionally, dietary fibre was thought to be a simple material called 'roughage or bran' that absorbed water and swelled in the digestive tract to provide bulk and easy passage of waste materials. This remains unchanged - fibre is an essential part of staying regular.

We now understand that fibre is a whole range of

different substances, all of which have distinct effects in the body. Some types of fibre help us to stay full, others help to lower cholesterol, and some can slow the rise in blood sugar levels after a meal.

The recommended intake for fibre has recently changed to take into account the varied roles of fibre in health and adults are now advised to eat 30g of fibre a day.<sup>1</sup> Current

fibre intakes in the UK, and particularly for women, are well below this, with only very few (just 2 in every 100 individuals!) eating 30g each day as part of their normal diet.<sup>2</sup>

**Women's fibre intakes, at 17g each day, fall woefully short of the 30g/day now recommended for good health**



### WHAT HAPPENS IF FIBRE INTAKE IS LOW?

A digestive system fed too little fibre will struggle to work well leaving us feeling sluggish and bloated.<sup>3</sup> Each year, two out of every five adults are likely to experience problems with digestive discomfort on a regular basis<sup>4</sup> and these symptoms occur more frequently among women.<sup>5</sup>



Breakfast and snacking are times where it is easiest to boost fibre intake<sup>15</sup>

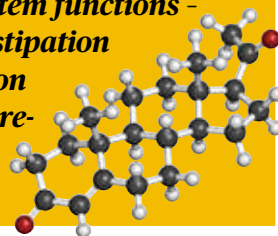
This can be quickly and easily corrected. Studies have shown that increasing fibre intake by as little as 5g per day (by switching to a high bran breakfast cereal) improves symptoms of bloating, sluggishness and constipation and improves general wellbeing. High fibre eaters felt less fat, more mentally alert, slim, happy and energetic,

less tired and stressed and had fewer headaches.<sup>6,7</sup> These effects all occurred in 5 days, or less, of boosting fibre intake.

### FIBRE AND THE MENSTRUAL CYCLE

Comfort and function of the digestive tract appears to be linked to a woman's monthly hormone cycle.<sup>8</sup> Typically, in

***Changing hormones of the menstrual cycle affect how the digestive system functions - making constipation more common during the pre-menstrual period<sup>10</sup>***



the few days before a period, women tend to become constipated. Once a period starts digestive function tends to speed up again.<sup>8,9</sup> Eating plenty of fibre will help to smooth out hormone related changes to bowel function and also help reduce levels of menstrual pain.<sup>8</sup>

*“Making several small changes across the day will help you achieve 30g dietary fibre each day. Find a swap that you can make and stick to”*

***Women in the UK typically need to boost fibre intake by around one third - equivalent to an extra 13g of fibre every day***



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## FIBRE AND THE MENOPAUSE

Menopause brings dramatic changes to hormone levels which has many effects, including raising the risk of developing heart disease and diabetes. A fibre rich diet has positive effects which can help counteract negative health changes of the menopause:

### Helping to:

#### AVOID MIDDLE-AGED SPREAD

- High fibre foods tend to keep you feeling fuller for longer. Bulk provided by a high fibre diet helps to stave off hunger helping us to keep trim.<sup>11</sup>

#### CUT RISK OF TYPE 2 DIABETES

- People with higher intakes of cereal fibre are thought to have a lower risk of developing Type 2 diabetes.<sup>12</sup>

#### KEEP CHOLESTEROL LEVELS IN CHECK

- Cholesterol levels typically rise. Soluble fibre found in oats, barley, beans and pulses and many types of fruit<sup>13</sup> can help maintain normal cholesterol levels.

A fibre rich diet can help counteract negative health changes of the menopause



Include beans or pulses into meals at least a couple of days each week

### DOES THE TYPE OF FIBRE MATTER?

Some types of fibre are better than others at helping maintain normal bowel function, promote regularity and keep digestion comfortable.<sup>1</sup> Bran fibres, especially wheat bran, are the most effective in terms of digestive health.<sup>14</sup> Soluble fibre, such as that found in oats, barley, beans and pulses can help maintain normal cholesterol levels. Choosing a wide range of higher fibre foods as part of a healthy balanced diet is a great approach.

### EASY STEPS TO BOOST FIBRE INTAKE

Breakfast and snacking are times where it is easiest to boost fibre intake.<sup>15</sup> Eat a high

*“Increasing fibre intake by as little as 5g per day improves symptoms of bloating, sluggishness and constipation and improves general wellbeing”*



## FIVE TIPS FOR A HIGH FIBRE WAY OF LIFE

**1** Start the day with high fibre breakfast cereal



**2** Choose 'wholemeal' over 'white'



**3** Include beans or pulses into meals at least a couple of days each week. Try beans on toast, bean salads or add a tin of beans or chickpeas into casseroles. Choose lentil dhal with curry



**4** Top fresh fruit with yoghurt and a generous sprinkle of high fibre granola or muesli



**5** Choose cereal bars higher in fibre, wholemeal scones or fruit buns



fibre breakfast cereal (check the label: high fibre means more than 6g fibre per 100g)<sup>16</sup>, or switch to wholemeal bread.

Making several small changes across the day will help you achieve 30g dietary fibre each day. Find a swap

that you can make and stick to. Find one thing you can change this week, try another one next week and build up to two or three high fibre choices over the next month. This allows your taste buds and digestive tract to get used to the changes. Fluid helps fibre to work so accompany each high fibre choice with a (non-alcoholic) drink.

## AUTHOR BIO

Since qualifying as a Registered Dietitian, Angie Jefferson BSc (Hons) RD, RPHNutr has researched, written and discussed with consumers and health professionals almost every aspect of diet and health. Her overriding aim is to deliver simple positive messages for optimal nutrition within a healthy lifestyle.



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