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DIETARY FIBRE

Eat more fibre. By now, you have probably heard it before from your mother, doctors, nutritionists or read it from newspapers or health magazines. The reason is that dietary fibre is found to have an effect on the gut wall and can improve bowel movement, as well as various effects against obesity, hypertension and diabetes. Also, research on their connection to cancer prevention is also making progress.

Therefore, it has become common sense that dietary fibre is indispensable in diet.

WHAT IS DIETARY FIBRE?

Dietary fibre is mainly found in fruits, vegetables, whole grains and legumes. Fibre is commonly classified as soluble, which dissolves in water, or insoluble, which doesn't dissolve.

SOLUBLE FIBRE

* This type of fibre dissolves in water to form a gel-like material. It can help lower blood cholesterol, glucose levels and lower the risk of heart disease and Type 2 diabetes.

* Found in oats, peas, beans, apples, citrus fruits, carrots, barleys, strawberries and blueberries.

INSOLUBLE FIBRE

* This type of fibre promotes the movement of material through the digestive system and increases stool bulk, so it can benefit those who struggle with constipation or irregular stools.

* Found in whole-wheat flour, nuts, beans and vegetables, such as cauliflower, broccoli, okra, green beans and potatoes.

One of the causes for the health effects brought by dietary fibre intake is the presence of acid materials in the short-chain fatty acid group, such as acetic acid, butyric acid and propionic acid, which are produced from carbohydrates, the main component of fibre. These acid materials maintain the mild acidity desirable as the gut environment, and thereby suppress the activities of harmful bacteria and harmful materials in the intestines and keep the intestines healthy.

Very interestingly, unlike other food components, such as fats, proteins or carbohydrates which our body breaks down and absorbs, fibre is not digested by our body enzymes. Instead, it passes relatively intact through the stomach, small intestine and colon and out of our body.

Since they cannot be digested, they are passed outside the body if they are left as they are. Then, what produces the short-chain fatty acids? The answer is good bacteria in the intestines, also known as gut bacteria.

Most dietary fibre cannot be digested with human enzymes, so they pass by the stomach and the small intestine and reach the large intestine, undecomposed. Then, good bacteria in the large intestine ferment dietary fibre with their own enzymes, and produce energy for themselves as well as short-chain fatty acids at the same time.

Besides maintaining a mildly acidic environment to keep the intestines healthy, short-chain fatty acids can prevent the production of cholesterol, so they also keep the blood circulatory system healthy and prevent hypertension.

HOW MUCH FIBRE DO YOU NEED A DAY?

Age 50 or younger	Age 51 or older
38g	30g
25g	21g

Increase fibre in your diet gradually over a period of a few weeks. This allows the natural bacteria in your digestive system to adjust to the change. A good rule of thumb is to add about 5g of fibre per day. Also, drink plenty of water. Fibre works best when it absorbs water.

Reference: 1. Probiotics Go Into Space. Gut Microbiotics, Probiotics, Prebiotics, and Synbiotics, and their Implications for Health. March 2018, pg 34-37.

Source: Yakult Live, Vol 33, July 2018



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Cars
Trucks
Bikes
Batteries
Mechanics

NOTICES

Financial
Tenders
General Notices

GENERAL

Services
Loans
Health
Renovations

PROPERTY

Land
Shoplots
Apartments
Room
Rental

APPOINTMENTS

Full/Part-time
Training
Graduate Scheme

GOVERNMENT

Jobs
Tenders
Legal

LEGAL/AUCTION

Property
Vehicle
Legal