Fiber: Why is it Important?

What is dietary fiber?

Dietary fiber is a type of carbohydrate that cannot be digested in the body. There are two types of fiber: soluble and insoluble fiber.

Soluble fiber dissolves in water and creates a gooey-like substance.

- Soluble fiber decreases high cholesterol and high blood sugar.
- Examples of foods that contain soluble fiber include fruits, oats, barley and legumes (peas and beans).

Insoluble fiber comes from plant cell walls and does not dissolve in water.

- It will absorb water and expand, and help make your stools softer and easier to pass.
- Examples of foods that contain insoluble fiber include some vegetables, whole wheat, rye and other grains.

Many foods have both soluble and insoluble fiber (like beans, apples, cereal like Cheerios, etc.).

What does fiber do?

- Fiber bulks the stool and attracts water into the intestine, making it softer and easier to pass.
- It can help prevent or treat constipation, which is common during recovery.
- It can help prevent diabetes, heart disease and colon cancer.
- It has also been shown to help with weight loss because it helps you feel full.

How much do I need?

- Adults should consume 25-30 grams of fiber daily, but most Americans eat only on average 15 grams a day.
- Drink lots of water and increase fiber slowly over a few weeks. Fiber needs water to work. Without water you may experience constipation or discomfort.
- Also, slowly adding fiber to your diet will prevent gas, bloating and diarrhea. Too much fiber can cause your stool to be too soft. It is all about moderation.

What about fiber supplements?

Fiber supplements include psyllium (Metamucil), wheat dextrin (Benefiber) and methylcellulose (Citrucel with Smartfiber).

Supplements should be started slowly into your diet with water to prevent gas and cramping. However, replacing supplements for high fiber foods is not recommended. Add fiber through whole foods.

Talk with your doctor before taking fiber supplements. They can interfere with your medications.

Cottage Health