



> diet

## DIGESTIVE HEALTH: WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT?

A fit digestive system is essential to maintain a healthy balance in our bodies – known as homeostasis. If the balance goes out of kilter, there will be noticeable changes in the quality of our physical health. In the case of our digestive system, we may begin to feel bloated, "windy" and lethargic and may experience abdominal pains.



Diet is one of the most important factors affecting our digestive health. Without food, water and oxygen we could not survive. The food we eat provides our body with the nutrients we need for energy, growth and repair – the rest is excreted as waste. Even those of us who eat what we consider to be a balanced diet could find we have a constipation episode from time to time. However, prevention is always better than cure, so there's no harm in nurturing your body with the food that is going to help it function at its best.

Food can move through the digestive system within 24-36 hours. However, in the UK, the average is approximately 50-60 hours. This is not surprising when you consider that our food travels from our mouth down into our stomach, then around seven meters of small intestine to be broken down and processed. It ends up in the large intestine more commonly known as the colon or bowel, from where it is excreted.

### The importance of fibre

Lack of fibre is one of the main causes of constipation. The government recommends we follow a high-fibre diet by eating at least 18g of dietary fibre a day, but the average UK diet contains only around 12 grams. This may be due to a lack of knowledge of the foods we eat, as it appears that few of us are really aware of the nutritional content of foods. Out of the choice of Weetabix, a bowl of porridge, a slice of wholemeal bread, an orange or a pear, when asked which contains the most fibre...

- 25% of us think that a slice of wholemeal bread contains the most fibre (a slice of wholemeal bread contains approximately 1.7 grams of fibre)
- Only 2% of those surveyed said correctly that a pear contained the most fibre (a pear contains approximately 2.6 grams of fibre).

These results highlight the fact that people may not be incorporating enough fibre into their diets.

## Foods your digestive system loves...

Eating a high fibre diet is key to achieving and maintaining digestive fitness. Incorporating the following foods into your diet will help to increase your fibre intake:

- Wholemeal bread
- Wholegrain cereals
- Fruit
- Vegetables

Fibre is the part of the food that we eat that our bodies cannot digest. There are two types of fibre - soluble and insoluble. Both types can be found in fruit, vegetables and grains. Soluble fibre dissolves easily in water and takes on a soft, gel-like texture in the intestines. Insoluble fibre passes almost unchanged through the intestines. The bulk and soft texture of fibre helps prevent hard, dry stools that are difficult to pass.

Food description	Portion Size	Dietary Fibre (grams)	Equivalent amount to obtain recommended 18 grams/day of fibre
White bread	1 slice (36 grams)	0.5	36 slices
Wholemeal bread	1 slice (36 grams)	2.1	8.5 slices
All Bran	40 gram bowl	9.8	2 bowls
Special K	30 gram bowl	0.6	30 bowls
Apple	1 apple (100 grams)	1.8	10 apples
Figs	4 figs (60 grams)	4.1	4 figs
Jacket potato	1 potato (180 grams)	4.9	3.5 jacket potatoes
Peas	70 grams	3.6	5 servings
Carrots	60 grams	1.5	12 servings
Wholemeal spaghetti	220 grams	7.7	2.5 servings
White spaghetti	220 grams	2.6	7 servings
Chicken curry	260 grams	3.4	5 servings

### And those foods not so loved...

It is an unfortunate fact of life that those things we love, tend not to be so good for us! However, there is no need to totally cut out foods high in sugar and fats such as chocolate, just try and cut down on the amount you eat. Here are a few tips:

1. Replace some sugary snacks with pieces of fruit and vegetables.
2. Eat raw nuts instead of crisps.
3. Keep processed foods/fast-foods to a minimum, as they are usually high in additives and preservatives and low in nutrition value.

### Drink your way to digestive fitness

Drink, drink, drink...and then drink some more! Consuming up to two litres of a fluid a day will give your digestive system the moisture it needs to keep things moving. And you do not just have to drink water: by choosing a variety of fluids throughout the day such as fruit juices and herbal teas, you will help keep yourself hydrated and healthy.

However, drinking too many cups of strong coffee or tea can actually, make you lose water as both act as a diuretic, which promotes water elimination from the body. Also steer clear of lots of sugary drinks – your teeth will also thank you in the long run !

### Alcohol – the do's and don'ts

Regular or excessive alcohol consumption can dehydrate your digestive system as your body tries to absorb all the water it can to flush out the alcohol. This can cause water to be re-absorbed from the stool, causing it to become hardened and more difficult to pass.

This does not mean that we have to abstain from alcohol totally - alcohol is something to be enjoyed, but too much can be harmful. The Department of Health advises that men should not drink more than 3-4 units of alcohol per day, and women should drink no more than 2-3 units of alcohol per day. These daily benchmarks apply whether you drink every day, once or twice a week, or occasionally.



## What is a unit of alcohol?

A unit is 10ml of pure alcohol which is equivalent to:

- A 125ml glass of red or white wine – 1 unit
- A pint of ordinary strength lager/beer – 2 units
- A pub measure of spirits – 1 unit

### Daily Benchmark Guide

Source: Alcohol Concern

#### Men

If you drink between 3 and 4 units a day there are no significant risks to your health

If you regularly drink 4 or more units a day, there is an increasing risk to your health

2 units

3 units

4 units

5 units

#### Women

If you drink between 2 and 3 units a day there are no significant risks to your health

If you regularly drink 3 or more units a day, there is an increasing risk to your health

## General recommendations

The Government currently recommends the following intakes for a healthy, balanced diet:

- Dietary fibre – 18 to 30 grams per day
- Fluid Intake: 1.5 to 2 litres per day
- Fruit and Vegetables: 5 portions a day.



## FURTHER INFORMATION

Further information on digestive health is available by calling the Digestive Fitness Information Bureau on 020 7761 1796 or by visiting [www.constipationadvice.co.uk](http://www.constipationadvice.co.uk)

Alternatively for further information on Senokot or Fybogel you can call the Medical Information Unit at Reckitt Benckiser on 0500 455 456.

