DIET & WEIGHT

The Fibre Gap Hiding on Your Plate

Most adults get far less fibre than they need, but closing the gap is less about counting and more about changing what fills your plate.

The missing half

You finish breakfast, clear lunch and make dinner without giving fibre much thought. Nothing looks obviously wrong. Yet most US adults get only about half the fibre they need, and an international review published in 2025 found that intake remains below recommended levels worldwide.

That makes "almost nobody gets enough" an exaggeration, but only just in spirit. The shortfall is widespread. Fibre is found mainly in plant foods: fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes, nuts and seeds. If those foods appear only around the edges of your meals, your intake can stay low without announcing itself.

The easiest trap is building most meals around foods with little or no fibre. Meat contains none, while chips, fast food and some prepared or heavily processed foods may provide very little. You can eat enough to feel satisfied and still miss the plant material that helps keep digestion moving.

Fibre is a carbohydrate, but your body does not absorb and break it down in the same way as other carbohydrates. That difference helps explain why it can support blood-sugar control without causing the same spike, and why it moves through your digestive system rather than simply disappearing into it. What looks like roughage is doing real work.

Two fibres, different jobs

"Fibre" sounds like one ingredient. It is really an umbrella for different substances in plants, often grouped as soluble and insoluble fibre. Both matter, and ordinary foods commonly bring more than one kind to the table. You do not need to turn every meal into a classification exercise.

Soluble fibre dissolves in water and forms a gel-like substance in the stomach. That slows digestion and can help with blood-sugar and cholesterol control. Oats, peas, black beans, lima beans, apples, bananas, Brussels sprouts and avocados are among the foods that provide it.

Insoluble fibre does not dissolve in water and typically remains whole as it passes through the

stomach. It adds bulk, supports regular bowel movements and helps keep the bowels healthy. You will find it in whole-wheat flour, bran, nuts, seeds and the skins of many fruits and vegetables.

Together, these fibres help food move through your system, make stools softer and easier to pass, and can help you feel full for longer. That last effect may support weight management, but it is not a promise that adding one high-fibre food will change your weight. Fibre-rich eating is a pattern, not a trick.

The honest message is substantial promise, not immunity from disease.

The evidence gets bigger than digestion

Constipation is where fibre's effects are easiest to notice. A 2022 systematic review of 16 randomised trials involving 1,251 adults with chronic constipation found that 66% of participants receiving fibre supplements responded, compared with 41% in control groups. Fibre also improved stool frequency and consistency.

The result was encouraging, not perfectly tidy. Findings varied considerably between trials, and the apparent benefits depended partly on the type of fibre and how the studies were conducted. Flatulence was also more common in the fibre groups. Even in controlled research, more fibre was not an instant or universally comfortable fix.

The wider health picture comes mostly from associations. A 2025 umbrella review brought together 33 meta-analyses covering 38 health outcomes and more than 17 million people. Higher fibre intake was associated with lower risk across many chronic diseases. The strongest evidence concerned death from cardiovascular disease, pancreatic cancer and diverticular disease.

The review also found highly suggestive evidence for associations with all-cause mortality, cardiovascular disease, coronary heart disease and ovarian cancer. But association is not a guarantee, and the quality of the included meta-analyses varied. Only six were rated methodologically high quality; others had limitations. The honest message is substantial promise, not immunity from disease.

Why good intentions can backfire

Once you notice the gap, it is tempting to attack it. A bowl of bran, a heap of beans, extra fruit, perhaps a supplement too. Your digestive system may object. Increasing fibre suddenly can cause gas, bloating, cramps, constipation or diarrhoea.

That discomfort does not mean fibre is inherently bad for you. It means speed matters. General dietary guidance consistently recommends adding fibre a little at a time so your body can adjust. Liquids matter as well because they help fibre work and help food move through the digestive system.

Supplements have evidence for chronic constipation, particularly certain fibres, but they are not interchangeable with a varied fibre-rich diet. The large review linking higher intake with lower disease risk assessed dietary fibre, while the constipation trials tested supplements. Those findings answer different questions and should not be collapsed into one sweeping claim.

This is also where a lifestyle experiment can become a medical conversation. If you are dealing with constipation, diabetes or prediabetes, or if your health affects how much liquid you should drink, ask a health professional or dietitian to help you plan. The right amount of food and fluid can depend on your health, activity, size and environment.

Make plants harder to miss

You do not need to memorise a target to see where your meals are thin. Look for the foods that reliably bring fibre: whole grains, legumes, vegetables, fruit, nuts and seeds. If most of them are absent, the gap has somewhere obvious to close.

The useful changes are ordinary ones. Oatmeal can carry berries and nuts. Whole-grain bread can hold avocado and chickpeas. Beans, lentils or peas can go into salads, soups, stews and casseroles. Brown rice, quinoa or whole-wheat pasta can replace a refined grain, while frozen vegetables can make a meal more substantial.

Fruit and vegetables can appear in meals or snacks, with edible skins left on where appropriate. Nuts and seeds offer another route. None of these foods has to carry the entire burden. Variety lets soluble and insoluble fibre arrive together, attached to foods you may already eat.

For the next week, do not chase a dramatic overhaul. Notice one meal that contains almost no plants, then give a fibre-rich food a larger role and increase gradually. Keep liquids in the picture. The goal is not to make your digestion notice your ambition; it is to build a plate where fibre is no longer easy to miss.

Where this comes from

- Dietary Fiber

  MedlinePlus, U.S. National Library of Medicine · https://medlineplus.gov/dietaryfiber.html

- Fiber: The Carb That Helps You Manage Diabetes | CDC

  Centers for Disease Control and Prevention · https://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/healthy-eating/fiber-helps-diabetes.html
- Eating, Diet, & Nutrition for Constipation | NIDDK

  National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases · https://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/digestive-diseases/constipation/eating-diet-nutrition
- The Effect of Fiber Supplementation on Chronic Constipation in Adults: An Updated Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Randomized Controlled Trials.

  The American journal of clinical nutrition, 2022 · https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35816465/
- The impact of dietary fiber consumption on human health: An umbrella review of evidence from 17,155,277 individuals.

  Clinical nutrition (Edinburgh, Scotland), 2025 · https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/40651334/