

Low-fiber (low-residue) diet

Definition

Fiber is the part of fruits, vegetables and grains not digested by your body. A low-fiber diet limits these foods and, in doing so, limits the amount of undigested materials that pass through your large intestine and lessens stool bulk. A low-fiber diet may be recommended for a number of conditions or situations.

A low-fiber diet is sometimes called a restricted-fiber or low-residue diet. Residue simply means any food, including fiber, that isn't digested and remains in the intestines.

Purpose

Your doctor may prescribe a low-fiber diet if there is narrowing of the bowel due to a tumor or an inflammatory disease; after bowel surgery, or when treatment, such as radiation, damages or irritates the gastrointestinal tract.

As your digestive system returns to normal, you usually can slowly add more fiber back into your diet.

Diet details

A low-fiber diet limits the types of vegetables, fruits, cereals and grains that you can eat. Occasionally, your doctor may also want you to limit the amount of milk and milk products that you can eat. Milk doesn't contain fiber, but it may leave a residue in the digestive tract and because of your current medical condition temporarily contribute to discomfort or diarrhea.

Because the ability to digest food varies from person to person, the following are guidelines about the types and amounts of foods for a low-fiber diet. Depending on your condition and tolerance, your doctor may recommend a diet that is more or less restricted. Also be sure to read food labels. Foods you might not expect can be high in fiber. For example, some yogurts, ice creams, cereals and even some beverages have added fiber. Look for foods that have no more than 1 gram of fiber in a serving.

The following foods are generally allowed on a low-fiber diet:

- Enriched white bread or rolls without seeds
- White rice, plain white pasta, noodles and macaroni
- Crackers
- Refined cereals such as Cream of Wheat
- Pancakes or waffles made from white refined flour
- Most canned or cooked fruits without skins, seeds or membranes
- Fruit and vegetable juice with little or no pulp, fruit-flavored drinks and flavored waters
- Canned or well-cooked vegetables without seeds, hulls or skins, such as carrots, potatoes and tomatoes
- Tender meat, poultry and fish
- Eggs
- Tofu
- Creamy peanut butter — up to 2 tablespoons a day
- Milk and foods made from milk, such as yogurt, pudding, ice cream, cheeses and sour cream — up to 2 cups a day, including any used in cooking
- Butter, margarine, oils and salad dressings without seeds
- Desserts with no whole grains, seeds, nuts, raisins or coconut

You should avoid the following foods:

- Whole-wheat or whole-grain breads, cereals and pasta
- Brown or wild rice and other whole grains such as oats, kasha, barley, quinoa
- Dried fruits and prune juice
- Raw fruit, including those with seeds, skin or membranes, such as berries
- Raw or undercooked vegetables, including corn
- Dried beans, peas and lentils
- Seeds and nuts, and foods containing them
- Coconut
- Popcorn

If you're eating a low-fiber diet, a typical menu might look like this:

Breakfast:

1 glass milk
 1 egg
 1 slice of white toast with smooth jelly
 1/2 cup canned peaches

Snack:

1 cup yogurt

Lunch:

1 to 2 cups of chicken noodle soup
 Soda crackers
 Sandwich of drained tuna with mayonnaise or salad dressing on white bread
 Canned applesauce
 Flavored water or iced tea

Snack:

White toast, bread or crackers
 2 tablespoons creamy peanut butter
 Flavored water

Dinner:

3 ounces lean meat, poultry or fish
 1/2 cup white rice
 1/2 cup cooked vegetables, such as carrots or green beans
 1 enriched white dinner roll with butter
 Hot tea

Prepare all foods so that they're tender. Good cooking methods include simmering, poaching, stewing, steaming and braising. Baking or microwaving in a covered dish is another option. Try to avoid roasting, broiling and grilling — methods that tend to make foods dry and tough. You may also want to avoid fried foods and go easy on spices.

Keep in mind that you may have fewer bowel movements and smaller stools while you're following a low-fiber diet. To avoid constipation, you may need to drink extra fluids. Drink plenty of water unless your doctor tells you otherwise, and use juices and milk as noted.

Results

Eating a low-fiber diet will limit your bowel movements and help ease diarrhea or other symptoms of abdominal conditions, such as abdominal pain. Once your digestive system has returned to normal, you can slowly reintroduce fiber into your diet.

Risks

Because a low-fiber diet restricts what you can eat, it can be difficult to meet your nutritional needs. Therefore you should use a low-fiber diet only as long as directed by your doctor. If you must stay on this diet for a longer time, consult a registered dietitian to make sure your nutritional needs are being met.