



HEALTHY CHOICES

Latest tips on the art of living well.

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Digestive health



Most of us are unaware of the digestive processes going on while we're enjoying favourite foods but as we munch away, our taste-buds, stomach, pancreas, liver, gallbladder, small and large intestines are all working on digestion.

Good digestive health means the food we eat is broken down efficiently, used by our bodies to produce energy or removed as waste which brings us to one of the less savoury topics of digestive health – bowel irregularity and discomfort. Many people experience these on a regular basis and it can be both inconvenient and embarrassing.

It is estimated that in the United States alone, 42 million people are affected and in many European and Oceanic nations the rate is similar – around 15% of the population. Women are generally more afflicted than men. Too often, we ignore these small signs but, while it's not something people really want to talk about, elimination of waste from the body is essential to good health.

An obvious step to improving bowel regularity is to consume more fibre. New Zealanders don't eat enough fibre, with statistics showing adult men eat an average of 23g daily (recommended 30g) and adult women eat 18g daily (recommended 25g). Statistics worldwide are even worse – if you're from the US or the UK, your average fibre intake is closer to 14g per day.

Fibre is the portion of edible plants that are resistant to digestion and absorption. They pass through the small intestine, undergo fermentation in the large intestine and are then eliminated from the body. Fibre comes in many forms. It is recommended to eat plenty of vegetables, fruit, whole grains and legumes and avoid refined, processed foods.

Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) states that dietary fibre is essential for normal gut function and is considered the most effective treatment for all forms of bowel irregularity. Fibre helps by providing bulk and soft content to the stool as well as speeding up transit time. This helps regulate consistency and reduces the time that waste material in faecal matter is in contact with

the bowel – meaning faster clearance of toxins from your body.

Before you rush out and stock up on fibre rich foods and supplements, it's worth remembering that you should increase your fibre intake slowly. A dramatic increase may lead to gas and bloating and leave you wondering why you adopted this healthy change. Don't give up, just slow down. It is wise to start any fibre supplement on the lowest recommended dose and over a few weeks build up to the maximum dose to prevent adverse side effects from occurring.

Some people may experience discomfort when they add more fibre. This may be due to an imbalance of bacteria in the colon and sometimes the small intestine. This can cause you discomfort and possibly malodorous gas. If this happens, consider a probiotic to balance your gut flora. We should have a healthy balance in the gut between good and bad bacteria.

If you have ongoing digestive issues it pays to see a healthcare professional.

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