

Chow Line

News from the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences

What will happen when fiber is no longer fiber

I understand that the recommendation for fiber intake is going up. When will we see that reflected on Nutrition Facts labels?

The new labels should be on foods by July 2018. And you're right, the Daily Value — the number on Nutrition Facts labels that indicates the recommended intake for nutrients — is increasing from 25 grams of fiber a day to 28. As with any Daily Value number, this is the recommended level for someone eating a 2,000-calorie-a-day diet. The higher number is based on findings of the Institute of Medicine, which recommends that people consume 14 grams of fiber for every 1,000 calories consumed. Unfortunately, most people don't get nearly that amount.

Along with Daily Value update, the Food and Drug Administration also actually provided a definition of what counts as fiber for Nutrition Facts labels. And unless the rules are updated before taking effect, some fiber that's included in many processed foods today won't meet the new standard.

There are many different types of fiber, and they don't all act in the body the same way. So, in the new definition, the FDA requires that any fiber included on the Nutrition Facts listing have an established "beneficial physiological effect" — that is, it has to be considered beneficial to human health. Such benefits include reduced blood glucose, cholesterol or blood pressure; increased satiety, which would help people reduce calorie intake; improved laxation or bowel function; and increased absorption of minerals, such as calcium.

The FDA will allow any fiber that's intrinsic and intact in the food itself — the fiber naturally found in fruits, vegetables and whole grains, for example — to be included in the grams listed under "fiber" on the new labels. But it won't include everything.



image: photos.com

Today, food manufacturers often extract and isolate fiber from foods to add to high-fiber breakfast bars, protein shakes, cereals, breads, yogurts, granolas and even calorie-free sweeteners. They can also chemically synthesize some types of fiber.

These "isolated or synthetic" types of fiber not only provide additional fiber to the processed food, but also often help provide the flavor and texture that the food manufacturer is looking for in the finished product. However, not all types of this kind of fiber have been shown to have the human health benefits the FDA is looking for.

So far, the FDA lists 25 fibers in this category as making the grade, allowing them to be counted as fiber. They include psyllium husk, guar gum, pectin and cellulose. But in its review of the scientific literature, the FDA could not find health benefits of other types of fiber often used in processed foods, including inulin, bamboo fiber, soy fiber, pea fiber and wheat fiber. As it stands now, those ingredients, like all fiber, would have to be included in the amount of carbohydrate in the food but would not be counted in the amount of fiber.

The agency could update the list of what's allowed to be included in the fiber listing as scientific evidence develops. But as it stands today, many of the "high-fiber" foods you see on grocery store shelves may no longer meet that criteria under the new rules.

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