

ORGANIC LIVING

By
Robert Rodale

IS ALFALFA IN YOUR FUTURE?

What do heart disease, cancer of the colon, diverticulosis and diabetes have in common?

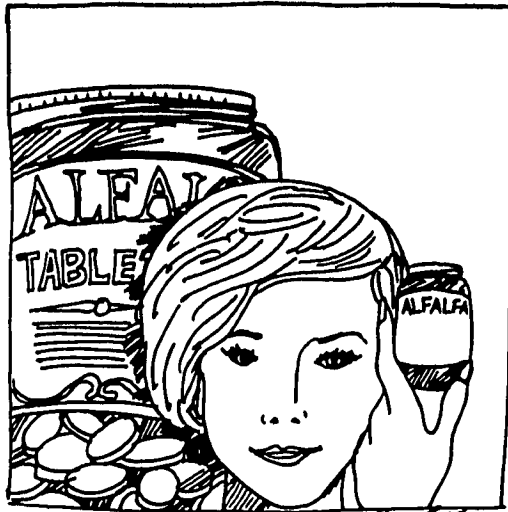
Researchers are now beginning to believe that this seemingly unrelated collection of maladies may all be at least partially caused by a lack of fiber in the diet.

"Ridiculous!" you say? The facts don't bear you out. Statistics show the incidence of those diseases has skyrocketed since the total amount of fiber in the civilized diet has dropped.

Call it roughage, bulk or non-nutritive fiber, it means only one thing: Protection from many of the diseases that plague our modern-day society. It's not easy to change the eating habits of a lifetime. But adding fiber to your diet could be the single most important change you'll ever make.

If we compare the diets of most Americans of today with those of 50 or 100 years ago, the differences would be readily apparent. Today, for example, a major portion of foods found on the shelves of supermarkets have been processed and refined until few nutrients remain. Most of the fiber has been removed as well, because no one suspected that it played any nutritive role at all. Fiber was thought of as excess baggage: The sooner you shed it, the better off you were.

Times are changing, however. More and more researchers are coming to recognize the importance of fiber. Recently, a number of scientists urged the federal government to encourage Americans to eat more fiber by having fiber-rich foods included in school-lunch programs, on food stamp programs and in meals fed to servicemen.



Most of the research into the role of fiber in the diet has been done in Europe, especially in relation to cancer, diverticulosis and diabetes. Americans seem loathe to admit that there is anything wrong with their food. But one American researcher, Dr. David Kritchevsky, a biochemist from Philadelphia's prestigious Wistar Institute, is convinced that fiber — in particular alfalfa — may play a significant role in lowering cholesterol levels.

If true, implementing a diet heavy in fiber might mean an accompanying decrease in atherosclerosis, one of the major medical killers in America today.

Dr. Kritchevsky's work with baboons and rabbits suggests that fiber works in the intestinal tract, binding bile salts, which are produced from cholesterol. The bile salts are then excreted and the body synthesizes additional bile salts from the stored reserves of cholesterol, thereby lowering the body's overall cholesterol supply.

And among all the fibers studied to date, alfalfa seems to bind a larger amount of bile acid than almost any other non-nutritive fiber.

"Alfalfa is not completely non-nutritive," Dr. Kritchevsky said. "But what is in it that binds? We don't know. We're researching into all areas of fiber. We have our observations and we have our hypothesis. We don't have the final proof.

"We have to find out whether or not the 'something' in alfalfa is the only factor or a contributing factor to the lowering of cholesterol.

"There might be some minor trace element in alfalfa. Those who eat it get a lot of that trace element and therefore have a lower cholesterol level."

Though Dr. Kritchevsky won't say how close he or other

researchers are to finding what "it" is in fiber that works its magic, the conclusion is clear. Either we start putting more fiber into our diets, or we're going to continue suffering from those problems.

Getting fiber into your diet isn't difficult at all. Fresh fruits and vegetables are relatively rich in roughage but aren't really as highpowered a source as whole grains and nuts.

Alfalfa is available in several forms. Health food manufacturers sell it as a food supplement in a tablet form. Then again, you can take alfalfa seeds and sprout them. Added to your salad, alfalfa sprouts provide an added taste treat as well as a potent source of fiber.

But there are other forms in which to get fiber: Unprocessed bran is one of the most common. This can be sprinkled over hot cereal in the morning or baked into your whole grain bread.

It doesn't matter where you get your fiber — or how. The important thing is that you get it.

(Editor's Note: The opinions appearing in "Organic Living" are those of its author, Robert Rodale, an independent columnist. Rodale's comments do not necessarily reflect the thinking of the Lancaster Farming editor or anyone else on the Lancaster Farming staff.)

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