

Ancient Source of Fiber Grows Popular for Shedding Pounds

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✓ Fact Checked

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Psyllium husk, which comes from *Plantago ovata*, a plant native to Asia, has been used in traditional Indian and Chinese medicine for centuries
- › This ancient digestive aid has begun trending among a new generation – one that grew up watching their parents down psyllium-husk powder and water to stay regular
- › Psyllium husk is a far safer alternative to weight loss drugs like semaglutide, more popularly known as Ozempic
- › A comprehensive review and meta-analysis published in the *Journal of the American Association of Nurse Practitioners* found psyllium decreased body weight, body mass index and waist circumference in overweight and obese individuals
- › Known for its appetite-reducing effects, psyllium husk also relieves constipation and may be useful for supporting heart and cardiometabolic health

Organic, whole husk psyllium is an excellent fiber supplement, especially when taken two hours after a meal with a full glass of water. This ancient digestive aid has also started trending among a new generation – one that grew up watching their parents down psyllium-husk powder and water to stay regular.¹

But there's something to be said for psyllium husks – not in commercially available orange-flavored products but in their minimally processed, whole-husk form.

The seeds, which come from *Plantago ovata*, a plant native to Asia, have been used in traditional Indian and Chinese medicine² for centuries and now its many benefits are being realized by those using for weight loss, gluten-free baking and a host of uses in between.

Psyllium Husk Embraced by the Ozempic Crowd

With both soluble and insoluble fiber, psyllium husk is often used as an appetite suppressant among those looking to lose weight. The New York Times reported:³

“Mr. [Max] Wittek, 33, a software engineer in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, who recently went on a ketogenic diet, has used psyllium husks to make his cauliflower-based pizza crust more filling.” Psyllium, he said, “shushes my belly from saying, ‘Please put something in me.’”

It’s a far safer alternative to weight loss drugs like semaglutide, more popularly known as Ozempic. The demand for medications promising easy weight loss has skyrocketed, with prescriptions rising 2,082% from 2019 to 2022.⁴ Sales of psyllium-husk products are also on the rise, with 249 such products released in the U.S. from 2018 to 2022.⁵

When you add water to psyllium, it forms a viscous gel that’s not digested or fermented in the body. In the small intestine, psyllium increases the viscosity of chyme — a semi-fluid mix of partially digested food, fluid and stomach acid — which slows absorption and degradation of nutrients.⁶

A comprehensive review and meta-analysis published in the Journal of the American Association of Nurse Practitioners found psyllium decreased body weight, body mass index and waist circumference in overweight and obese individuals. “Gel-forming nonfermented psyllium fiber, dosed just before meals, is effective in facilitating weight loss in overweight and obese participants,” the team concluded.⁷

Known for its appetite-reducing effects, a separate study comparing psyllium husk to the weight loss drug orlistat in mice found both treatments had a similar effect on controlling body fat rate, but psyllium worked better to reduce triglyceride levels.⁸

Among obese or overweight children and adults, as well as those with metabolic syndrome, daily consumption of psyllium was also found to improve blood lipid profiles and glycemic response, while increasing satiety and improving metabolic syndrome and cardiovascular disease risk factors.⁹

Why You Should Try Natural Strategies, Not Ozempic

Weight loss drugs like Ozempic are all the rage, but their growing list of significant side effects – not to mention their high costs – has people seeking out safer, more natural options like psyllium. This is good news, since semaglutide, sold under the name Ozempic as a diabetes drug and, in a higher dose, under the name Wegovy as a weight loss drug, can also lead to debilitating side effects, including stomach paralysis.

Gastroparesis, or delayed gastric emptying,¹⁰ slows or stops the movement of food from your stomach to your small intestine. This results in feeling full longer, which is one mechanism semaglutide uses to cause weight loss. However, gastroparesis also leads to nausea, vomiting and, in severe cases, dehydration and malnutrition. Diabetes is the most commonly known cause of gastroparesis, due to nerve damage in the stomach.¹¹

However, semaglutide and similar drugs are designed to delay gastric emptying, and severe nausea and vomiting – common symptoms of gastroparesis – are reported in many who take them. Even WeightWatchers, also known as WW, is moving into the obesity drug market via its acquisition of telehealth platform Sequence, where it intends to provide its clients with easy access to weight loss drugs like Wegovy.¹²

Psyllium suppresses appetite in a similar manner, but is much safer overall. As noted in *Alimentary Pharmacology & Therapeutics*, “Although psyllium is useful, it may cause loss of appetite and delay gastric emptying if used before meals ...”¹³

Berberine – Another ‘Natural Ozempic’

On the topic of natural alternatives to Ozempic, berberine is another option with similar benefits to psyllium, although it’s an entirely different compound. Berberine is a

chemical found in plants such as goldenseal and European barberry.¹⁴ Research shows it helps to regulate blood sugar and may help with weight loss.

A 2022 systematic review of the literature demonstrated that supplementing with berberine had a positive effect on lipid profile, fasting blood glucose, obesity parameters and systolic blood pressure.¹⁵

In a 2022 paper in *Frontiers in Cellular and Infection Microbiology*, the researchers wrote, "Studies have shown that BBR [berberine] can alleviate the pathological conditions of metabolic disorders, and the mechanism is related to the regulation of gut microbiota ... meanwhile, the structure and function of gut microbiota also changed after intervention by berberine."¹⁶

Like psyllium, berberine may also delay the amount of time it takes for food to pass through your small intestine,¹⁷ and preferentially nourish microbes that produce beneficial short-chain fatty acids known to have many health benefits.¹⁸

Psyllium Husk Offers More Than Weight Loss

The beauty of natural compounds like psyllium is they typically have multiple beneficial effects. Psyllium husk is no different, acting as a health-promoting prebiotic in your gut.

"Psyllium husk ... consists of highly branched and gel-forming arabinoxylan, a polymer rich in arabinose and xylose which has limited digestibility in humans. However, several members of the intestinal microbiota can utilize these oligosaccharides and their constituent sugars as an energy source and, therefore, psyllium can be considered to have prebiotic potential," researchers explained in the *International Journal of Molecular Sciences*.¹⁹

Prebiotics help increase the growth of beneficial bacteria while boosting production of short-chain fatty acids like butyrate and propionate, which play a role in building the gut barrier,²⁰ making it less permeable to disease-causing microorganisms.²¹ Further, butyrate has been shown to induce programmed cell death of colon cancer cells.²²

Psyllium also helps retain water in the small intestine, increasing water flow to the colon.²³ This makes it a powerful natural option for constipation relief. “It traps water in the intestine increasing stool water, easing defecation and altering the colonic environment,” researchers with the University of Helsinki, Finland, and colleagues explained.

This is associated with significant changes in gut microbiota, particularly in those who are constipated.²⁴ Psyllium works as well as kiwifruit and prunes for relieving constipation and has the added benefit of significantly improving straining.²⁵ Psyllium has also been found to work better than wheat bran for constipation relief and is also useful for diarrhea and other bowel issues:²⁶

“The water-holding capacity of the psyllium gel acts as a stool normalizer, softening hard stool in constipation, firming loose/liquid stools in diarrhea, and normalizing stool form/reducing symptoms in irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). Psyllium is the only isolated fiber recommended for treatment of IBS by the American College of Gastroenterology and chronic idiopathic constipation by the American Gastroenterological Association.”

Psyllium Benefits Your Heart and Metabolic Health

Psyllium offers many additional health benefits, which are clinically proven, including:²⁷

- Improved glycemic control among people with metabolic syndrome and Type 2 diabetes
- Cholesterol optimization
- Lower blood pressure

A report funded by the Council for Responsible Nutrition (CRN) Foundation found that were U.S. adults over the age of 55 with heart disease to take psyllium dietary fiber on a daily basis, it could cut health costs by nearly \$4.4 billion a year by reducing coronary heart disease-related medical events by 11.5%.²⁸

A review published in *Food & Function* also hailed the potential for psyllium to prevent and treat cardiometabolic diseases and their complications, noting, “Numerous pharmacological studies have investigated the active ingredients and therapeutic effects of psyllium and its extracts, including antioxidant, anti-tumor, antidiabetic, hypotensive, anti-inflammation, neuroprotection, antidiarrheal, and antiviral activities.”²⁹

Psyllium husk may also reduce the risk of gallstone formation by decreasing the body's biliary cholesterol saturation index.³⁰

Organic Psyllium Is Best

Psyllium is a heavily sprayed crop, which means many sources are contaminated with pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers. For this reason, only use organic unsweetened psyllium husk. Taking organic psyllium three times a day could add as much as 18 grams of fiber (soluble and insoluble) to your diet.

Ideally, you'll want to get around 25 to 50 grams of fiber per 1,000 calories consumed, so you'll want to use psyllium in addition to a fruit- and veggie-rich diet. As mentioned, consume psyllium along with a full glass of water. It can also be useful in cooking and baking, and many gluten-free recipes rely on psyllium husks.

Serious adverse reactions to psyllium are rare, but if you have swallowing difficulties, narrowing of the esophagus or other gastrointestinal tract obstructions, you should consult your physician before using psyllium.

In addition to psyllium, healthy foods with high amounts of fiber include green peas, artichoke, baked sweet potato with the peel intact, spinach, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cauliflower and many other vegetables.

Additional options that are also excellent fiber sources include pears, raspberries, stewed prunes, dried figs or dates (eaten in moderation due to high sugar content), pumpkin, apples with the skin intact and oranges.

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