

Are Your Whole Grains Really *Whole*?

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By now, you've probably heard a little something about the importance of eating *whole grains*. A large and mounting body of scientific evidence has found that these nutrient-packed grains may lower the risk of diabetes, heart disease, cancer, and obesity. There is a 30% lower risk of having metabolic syndrome, a set conditions that increases the risk of diabetes and heart disease, for people who eat 3 or more servings of whole grains each day, says Tufts University in Boston. The 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, published by the National Institutes of Health, also encourages whole grain.

Just what is "whole grain" and what makes it so powerful? It is the mix of nutrients in whole grain, not just one individual substance that provides so many health benefits. Whole grains include all parts of the grain – bran, germ and endosperm, which is milled away in refined or processed grains like white bread products, pastries, croissants, doughnuts, cookies, etc. In refined products, you are left with only the endosperm. The bran and germ carry healthful fats, protein, antioxidants, B vitamins, minerals and fiber. One of the minerals, magnesium, helps increase the body's sensitivity to insulin (hormone that balances blood sugar) which helps lower the risk of diabetes. The B vitamins and fiber help reduce the risk of heart disease. Fiber can help lower harmful blood sugar and fat levels in the blood. Fiber also helps you feel satisfied longer so you don't eat as much.

Historically, people considered the milled, refined flour superior to the coarse whole-wheat flour. It was only the wealthy that could afford the refined flour and the peasants ate the whole grain. It wasn't until the millers began using giant steel rollers in the 19th century that refined flour became cheap enough for everyone to afford. Ironically, up until that time, it was the peasants who were reaping the health benefits of the fiber, vitamins and minerals.

Making sure you get an actual "whole grain" product can be a bit tricky since manufacturers' labels can be very misleading. They are allowed to put many statements on their labels that may lead you to believe you are buying whole grain. Here are some things to look for on the label that will help you choose truly whole grain products:

- Make sure the first ingredient listed begins with "whole" in any bread or grain-related food. Examples include whole wheat, whole-wheat flour, and whole rolled oats. Brown rice, barley or some of the more unusual grains like spelt or kamut would also be considered whole grain. If it says, "enriched" or just "wheat flour" it is a refined product. Even "multi-grain," "7-grain," or "9-grain" doesn't necessarily mean "whole grain."
- Look for fiber content also. If a product has 3-4 grams of fiber it is considered a "good" source of fiber. If it has 5 grams or more it is an "excellent" source of fiber.
- Check the ingredients list for anything that is related to "hydrogenated" oils. These are the "bad" fats and contribute to heart disease. Just because it has zero grams of transfats listed on the label (now required by the FDA) doesn't necessarily mean there are none in the product. Manufacturers can have 0.5 grams or less per serving and call it "transfat free." Many refined products will have hydrogenated oils because it extends shelf life.

Here are some ways to incorporate whole grains into your diet:

- Besides whole grain breads, consider whole grain hot and cold cereals.
- Mix whole grain cereals into light yogurts to add some crunch.
- If a recipe calls for white flour, substitute at least half with whole wheat flour.
- Check out whole grain pancakes like buckwheat for a hearty breakfast.
- Consider whole grain pastas with many new shapes and flavors available.
- Don't forget whole grain crackers with your peanut butter, cheese or favorite soup.
- Add whole grains like barley or brown rice to soups to increase flavor and texture.
- Whole grains can even enhance desserts like oatmeal in apple crisp or oatmeal raisin cookies.

As always, God has given us another remarkable food called "whole grain." Take advantage of this nutrient-rich food!