



Whole grains: Hearty options for a healthy diet

By Mayo Clinic staff

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Find out why whole grains are better than refined grains and how you can add more whole grains to your diet.

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Hailed as the "staff of life" for their historical importance to human survival, grains are an essential part of a healthy diet. Also called cereals, grains are the seeds of grasses, which are cultivated for food. They come in many shapes and sizes, from large kernels of popcorn to small quinoa seeds.

All types of grains are good sources of complex carbohydrates, various vitamins and minerals, and are naturally low in fat. But grains that haven't been refined — called whole grains — are even better for you. Whole grains are better sources of fiber and other important nutrients, such as selenium, potassium and magnesium. So whenever you can, choose whole grains over refined grains.

Whole grains vs. refined grains

A slice of commercially prepared white bread has 66 calories, 1.9 grams protein and 0.6 grams fiber. A slice of whole-wheat bread has 69 calories and provides 3.6 grams protein and 1.9 grams fiber. It isn't hard to see which one is the better nutritional bet.

Whole grains haven't had their bran and germ removed by milling, making them good sources of fiber — the part of plant-based foods that your body doesn't digest. Among many health benefits, high-fiber foods also tend to make you feel full longer.

Refined grains, such as white rice or white flour, have both the bran and germ removed from the grain. Although vitamins and minerals are added back into refined grains after the milling process, they still don't have as many nutrients as whole grains do, and they don't provide as much fiber naturally.

Choosing whole grains

Eat whole-grain versions — rather than refined grains — as often as possible. Whole-grain versions of rice, bread, cereal, flour and pasta can be found at any grocery store. Many whole-grain foods come ready to eat. These include a variety of breads, pastas and ready-to-eat cereals.

Examples of whole grains include:

- Barley
- Brown rice
- Buckwheat
- Bulgur (cracked wheat)
- Millet
- Oatmeal
- Popcorn
- Whole-wheat bread, pasta or crackers
- Wild rice

When in doubt, check the label. Look for the word "whole" on the package, and make sure whole grains appear among the first items in the ingredient list. Try to choose items with at least 3 grams of dietary fiber per serving.

Can white bread really be whole wheat?

Yes. Although white whole-wheat bread looks and tastes like white bread, it has the same nutritional benefits as regular whole-wheat or whole-grain bread. White whole-wheat bread is made with an albino variety of wheat, which is lighter in color and has a sweeter, milder flavor. Regular whole-wheat bread is made with red wheat, which is dark in color and has a slightly bitter taste. White whole wheat also has a softer texture, because it goes through an extra processing step.

Ways to enjoy more whole grains

Try these tips for adding more whole grains to your meals and snacks:

- Enjoy breakfasts that include high-fiber cereals, such as bran flakes, shredded wheat or oatmeal.
- Substitute whole-wheat toast or whole-grain bagels for plain bagels. Substitute low-fat, bran muffins for pastries.
- Make sandwiches using whole-grain breads or rolls. Swap out white-flour tortillas with whole-wheat versions.
- Replace white rice with kasha, brown rice, wild rice or bulgur.
- Feature wild rice or barley in soups, stews, casseroles and salads.
- Add whole grains, such as cooked brown rice or whole-grain bread crumbs, to ground meat or poultry for extra body.
- Use rolled oats or crushed bran cereal in recipes instead of dry bread crumbs.

As they've been for centuries, grains remain the staff of life forming the basis for many healthy meals and snacks. Eating a variety of whole grains not only ensures that you get more nutrients, but also helps make your meals and snacks more interesting.

References

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