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Whole Grains

Carbohydrates are the foundation of energy production in the body. As a nation, we have been on an anti-carb kick for at least a decade since the last time the Atkins diet was popular. Sugar Busters and South Beach also tell you to restrict refined carbs, especially those made with refined grains such as bread, bagels, and pasta. If you're going to eat grains, you should eat whole grains, they say. So exactly what is a whole grain? Does whole-wheat pasta count? If the label says wheat, is that the right bread to take home? What about chips made with whole grains? You'll have those answers by the end of this message.

Whole Grains: Unprocessed

You would think defining a whole grain would be easy—and it is. But identifying foods that contain whole grains is most assuredly not easy. In the Dietary Guidelines 2010, they tell us 152 times to eat whole grains (2); then they spend only 169 words in the document advising us how to read labels to determine if a processed food actually contains whole grains. It's complicated, so I'll try to be clear how to assess the whole grains in processed foods.

So let's do the easy part. Whole grains, or foods made from them, should contain all the essential parts and naturally-occurring nutrients of the entire grain seed (1). Simple enough. Corn off the cob, popcorn, and wild rice would fit that definition exactly. Nothing was done other than harvesting it and in the case of popcorn, drying it.

If the grain has been processed (e.g., cracked, crushed, rolled, extruded, and/or cooked), the food product should deliver approximately the same rich balance of nutrients that are found in the original grain seed. The parts of a grain include the bran, the germ, and the endosperm. Therefore, to be called a whole grain a food must retain the same relative proportions of these components as they exist in the intact grain (2). Whole oats used in oatmeal have been flattened and rolled for easy cooking; nothing was removed so that's also pretty easy.

Whole Grains: Processed Foods

Now it gets a little more challenging. Nutrition Facts labels don't contain all the information we need, So how do we determine if a food we want to eat counts as a whole-grain product or not? We need some definitions first.

In order to be considered whole grain, the product must contain at least 51% of its total weight as whole grains or the product must provide at least eight grams of whole grains per ounce-equivalent of the product (2). That would be easy if the grams or percentage were actually listed on the label. It's not. The FDA says that we can infer how much whole grain is in a product by the placement of the grain in the ingredients list; the whole grain should be the first or second ingredient, after water. For foods with multiple whole-grain ingredients, they should appear near the beginning of the ingredients list. This is not as precise as we might like, but it gives us some direction.

Examples

I decided to check out some refined carbohydrates to see if they fit the "rules." I went to our pantry to look at the bread we eat. The first ingredient was whole-wheat flour. They added some other ingredients such as extra fiber from inulin, but overall, it appeared to fit the definition of a whole-grain product.

Then I checked out some cereals. Whole Grain Cheerios claims to be a whole-grain product. The list of ingredients bears that out: whole grain corn and whole grain oats are the first two ingredients. Who hasn't heard

of Shredded Wheat? It's a whole grain product: the ingredient list gives whole-grain wheat as the one and only ingredient.

How about crackers? I checked out Kellogg's Special K Multigrain Crackers and it also fits: whole-wheat flour is the first ingredient. Kashi TLC 7 Grain Crackers also fits the bill: unbleached wheat flour is the first ingredient followed by a blend of seven whole grains.

What about pasta? Looks like that fits as well but not as substantive. Barilla Whole Grain Pasta says it has 51% whole-wheat flour in their whole-grain pastas. That barely squeezes by.

Cereal, crackers, and pasta. Okay, but what about chips such as Sun Chips that claim they have whole grains in their chips. Their website claims 18 grams of whole-grain benefits per serving, well within the FDA definition of whole grains. I felt I had to do this research myself, so I bought a bag of French Onion Sun Chips. The first ingredient was whole corn, the third was whole wheat, and fourth was whole-oat flour. Whole-grain product? Yes, it is. What about the second ingredient? Sunflower oil and that's why one-third of calories come from fat, but that's a different message.

Caution: Check for These Words

When you look at the packaging, approach foods labeled with the words "multi-grain," "stone-ground," "100% wheat," "cracked wheat," "seven-grain," or "bran" with suspicion until you read the list of ingredients. They may not be a 100% whole-grain product. For that matter, they may not contain any whole grains at all, or at least not enough to fit the definition of whole grain. You must read the ingredients list to know for sure.

An Easy Shortcut

But there's another way. The Whole Grains Council provides a stamp pictured in this paragraph for whole-grain foods they've approved. If you see the symbol, look no further. Note that the stamps come in various denominations, from the minimum eight grams per serving to 47 grams or more, so you can easily add up your whole grains for the day until you get to the recommended 48 grams. This is the best shortcut to healthy eating I've seen in a long time. Just remember to adjust for serving size; if a serving is one slice of bread and you have two slices, double the grams per serving.



You can find a complete list of whole-grain products in the Whole Grains Council website using the link below. By the way, the bread in our pantry? It had the whole-grain stamp. I didn't know what it meant before I did the research for this message.

The Bottom Line

I've synthesized a lot of information to explain whole grains as simply as I could. Part of the problem is that manufacturers love using buzz words that can be deceiving on their packaging. They can even make foods look like they might be whole grain. Paula reminded me that you can be fooled by color; just because a food is darker, that doesn't mean it has whole grains. For example, the manufacturer might put molasses in bread to add sweetness, and it makes the bread look darker without adding any additional grains.

I think you have the basic information you need to make better choices in selecting the best type of carbohydrates from grains. Choose a variety of grains—some oatmeal, whole-wheat bread, soup with whole-grain barley, a bran muffin with your coffee, and so on. Reading the list of stamped foods at the Whole Grains Council website will really expand your thinking about how easy it is to incorporate more whole grains into your diet. There are foods even kids will easily eat, such as Scooby Doo Cinnamon Grahams and Low Fat Frosted Strawberry Pop-Tarts; I was surprised at how long the Treats list is. The restaurant info includes many of the restaurants you drive by every day, including McDonalds and Burger King—those two don't offer a lot of whole-grain choices, but at least they make the list. A healthier alternative would be to browse the recipe list—I found some very interesting possibilities there. And when we say whole grains, how many of us think of fresh, frozen, or canned corn? But it's a perfect example of a whole grain with 70 or more grams in an ear or half-cup serving.

Remember, your body looks for carbohydrates as the first choice for energy. You don't want to eat them to excess, but they're a powerhouse of nutrition if you pick the right whole grains, and they come with a side order of fiber plus some antioxidants not found in fruits and vegetables.

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

P.S. For those of you who like to listen to the message—sorry, this one isn't recorded yet because I'm out of town, but we'll get it posted to the Messages page at drchet.com after I get home Sunday night.

References:

1. www.wholegrainscouncil.org.
2. www.cnpp.usda.gov/dietaryguidelines.htm.

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