

Get The Full Benefits Of Whole Grains In Your Diet

by Dr. Graham A. Colditz
May 7 2022 7:15 AM



ALTON - It's likely no surprise to hear that whole grains are a key part of a healthy diet. They're filled with fiber, vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients. Studies have found that regularly eating whole grains can lower the risk of heart disease, diabetes, and cancer. And they may even help people live longer.

But while the benefits of whole grains are clear, it can be hard for many of us to fit them into our meals. On average in the U.S., we eat only about a third of the recommended amount of whole grains each day.

This may be, in part, because it's not always easy to know which grains and grain foods actually count as whole grains. So, what are whole grains exactly? They're grains that include the three key parts of the natural grain kernel – bran, germ, and endosperm. This differs from refined grains, like white rice and white flour, which have the bran and germ removed during processing.

Bran and germ are rich in many healthy nutrients and other compounds.

Luckily, most of us are already familiar with a number of whole-grain foods, such as 100 percent whole-wheat bread, rolled oats, brown rice, and whole-grain pasta. For others, the food label is a great guide. Choose foods that have whole grain as the first ingredient. Look for words like “whole” and “whole-grain.” The first ingredient in the list is the most common ingredient. So, if the label on your cereal starts with “whole-grain oats,” then whole-grain oats are the main ingredient.

This isn't a perfect system, though, because some foods can have whole grains as a first ingredient but also have a lot of added sugar. Sugary breakfast cereals can be a good example of this. So, it's best to choose whole-grain foods that also have little or no added sugar.

It's also important not to let the color of a food be your only guide. Some dark breads, for example, can look like they're made with a lot of whole grains but may have only a small amount or none at all. Their darker color can come from ingredients, such as molasses, rather than whole-wheat flour. Ingredients, such as molasses, rather than whole-wheat flour.

If you're used to eating mostly refined grains, adding more whole grains to your meals may take some getting used to. Whole grains can taste great, but they do have a more complex flavor than refined grains. So, start slowly. This helps your taste buds adjust and helps you figure out the best ways to add whole grains to your routine.

When making rice, begin by using half white rice and half brown rice. And, do the same with white pasta and whole-grain pasta – and any other grain foods you regularly eat.

Try to build up to where at least half of all the grains you eat each day are whole grains. For most adults, that means about 3 to 4 ounces of whole grains daily. That's around 3 to 4 slices of whole-grain bread or 1½ to 2 cups of cooked brown rice.

Apart from some simple choices, such as 100 percent whole-wheat breads and whole-grain cereals, it can take a little extra time to learn how best to fold healthy whole-grain foods into your regular meals. But the benefits of choosing more whole grains are fully worth the effort.

It's your health. Take control.

Dr. Graham A. Colditz, associate director of prevention and control at Siteman Cancer Center at Barnes-Jewish Hospital and Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis, is an internationally recognized leader in cancer prevention and the creator of the free prevention tool YourDiseaseRisk.com. Alton Memorial Hospital is a member of the Siteman Cancer Network.