

OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Dr. Michael Corey

The Whole Truth About Whole Grains

We hear a lot about the health benefits of whole grains these days. And food manufacturers know we're listening. Unfortunately, some manufacturers are using this trend to their advantage by liberally and questionably using the term "whole grain" to describe their products. Make sure you're armed with the whole truth about whole grains before your next trip to the grocery store.



Whole grains contain the whole kernel. When grains are refined or processed, two essential kernel components — the bran (the outer shell of the kernel) and germ (seed) — are removed. The bran and the germ supply most of the grain's health-boosting nutrients, such as niacin, thiamin, riboflavin, magnesium, phosphorus, iron and zinc. They're also outstanding sources of fiber.

Dr. Corey wants patients to understand that whole grains play a key role in preventing obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease and some types of cancer, according to new research. Unfortunately, differentiating between whole-grain products and less-healthy options can require some minor detective work. That's why Dr. Corey is teaching patients how to be whole-grain sleuths.

Don't Let Brown Bread Bamboozle You

Many brown breads contain little or no whole grain whatsoever. Some are simply white breads colored with molasses or artificial color to resemble



whole-grain brown bread.

Is It Really Whole Grain?

At the typical supermarket, only about 10 percent of grain-based products are genuinely whole grain. This alone can make finding true whole-grain items a challenge. The quest is compounded by the fact that many products appear to be whole grain, but only contain a miniscule amount — or none at all.

So what's the secret to finding whole grains on the grocery-store shelves? Dr. Corey suggests that you first examine the front of the package. If *just* the phrases "wheat," "whole grain" or "contains whole grains" appear, most likely only a fraction of the product consists of whole grains. Instead, look for claims like "100% whole grain" or "complete whole wheat." Also, don't be fooled by "multi-grain" options, which often contain mostly refined grains.

In addition, don't assume that because a product contains fiber, it's 100 percent whole grain. Of course, fiber is immensely healthy, but it's not interchangeable for whole grain.

After inspecting the front of the package, next check out the ingredient list. The *first* ingredient and *only* flour listed should contain the word "whole," such as "whole wheat," "stone-ground whole grain," "whole rye," "whole-grain pumpernickel" or

"whole oats."

Next, consider the second ingredient. Even if the primary ingredient is a whole grain, if the second is a form of refined grain, such as "wheat flour" or "enriched flour," then the product may still contain a large mix of refined flour. And don't be fooled by healthy-sounding ingredients, such as "unbleached wheat flour," "durum wheat," "cracked wheat" or "bran." In addition, just because a product is organic does not mean it is whole grain.

Again, whole grain should be the *first* ingredient and *only* flour listed.

Enriched Flour: Not So Enriching

Shoppers may be easily duped into confusing "enriched wheat flour" with whole grain. Enriched flour is far from whole, or its natural state. This flour undergoes a refining process that cleaves out essential nutrients. The product is "enriched" when manufacturers add back in a few of these nutrients. Enriched flour is not nearly as nutritious as whole grain.

Along those lines, "unbleached" is not the equivalent of whole grain. Unless it is clearly labeled "whole," then "unbleached wheat flour" has been refined — and stripped of health-boosting components.

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Whole Grain Health Benefits

So what exactly do you get in return for all your whole-grain detective work? Read on to find out.

Obstruct Obesity

Research shows that substituting refined grains with whole grains cuts the risk of becoming overweight or obese.

In one large-scale study, researchers tracked the breakfast habits of 17,881 subjects, aged 40 to 84 years. During eight years of follow-up, participants who consumed breakfast cereal with whole grains consistently packed fewer pounds than those who ate whole-grain cereals less often (*Obes Res* 2005;13:1952-60).

Why do whole grains encourage weight loss? The answer may lie in a food ranking system called the “glycemic index,” which ranks carbohydrate-containing foods based on their effects on blood sugar.

Processed foods, such as bread or pasta made with refined white flour, swiftly elevate blood sugar and have a high glycemic-index rating. On the other hand, whole-grain foods have much less effect on blood sugar and a low glycemic-index rating.

Increased blood sugar triggers an overproduction of the hormone insulin, ushering weight gain. In addition to stabilizing blood sugar, whole grains produce a feeling of fullness faster than refined grains, in part due to their fiber content.

Deter Diabetes

Research shows that a nutritious, low-fat diet — packed with whole grains and fiber — prevents type 2 diabetes.

For one study, researchers collected dietary information from 69,554 women aged 38 to 63 who were free from diabetes at the study’s onset.

Based on the subjects’ dietary habits, researchers identified two major dietary patterns: “prudent” and “Western.” The prudent pattern was characterized by higher consumption of whole grains, fruits, vegetables,

legumes, fish and poultry. Conversely, the Western diet included greater consumption of refined grains, red and processed meats, sweets and french fries.

During 14 years of follow-up, researchers determined that subjects in the Western pattern were most likely to develop the disease (*Arch Intern Med* 2004;164:2235-40).

Inhibit Inflammation

Most people think of inflammation as a response to infection or an acute injury. However, chronic inflammation is linked with diseases like cardiovascular disease, Alzheimer’s disease, diabetes, Parkinson’s disease and cancer.

One study of 902 individuals with diabetes examined whether consumption of whole grains was associated with inflammation.

A diet rich in whole grains significantly reduced two key markers of inflammation: C-reactive protein (CRP) and tumor necrosis factor-alpha receptor 2 (TNF-R2).

“Our data indicate that whole grains and a low-glycemic index diet may reduce systemic inflammation among women with type 2 diabetes,” conclude the study’s authors (*Diabetes Care* 2006;29:207-11).

Halt Heart Disease

Multiple studies show that whole grains reduce the risk of heart disease.

In an analysis of 938 subjects, researchers found that individuals with higher intakes of whole grains had lower incidence of heart disease. Participants who consumed the highest amount of whole grains had the lowest levels of total cholesterol and LDL (“bad”) cholesterol.

“The results suggest a lower risk of diabetes and heart disease in persons who consume diets high in whole grains.” (*Am J Clin Nutr* 2006;83:27.)

Another study examined 42,850 subjects who ranged in age from 40 to 75 years and were free from cardiovascu-

lar disease at the study’s onset. In dietary questionnaires, participants recorded their daily consumption of whole grains.

During a 14-year follow-up, researchers documented 1,818 cases of heart disease and found that risks were significantly elevated among individuals who refrained from, or rarely ate, whole grains (*Am J Clin Nutr* 2004;80:1492-9).

How Can I Get More Whole Grains?

Multiplying your whole-grain consumption is easy. Simply swap the refined-grain products in your diet with whole-grain items whenever possible.

For breakfast, skip white breads and opt for whole-grain cereals or whole-grain toast. For lunch or dinner, opt for whole-wheat pasta or brown rice. For snacks, consider whole-grain bread with hummus or tapenade (olive spread) rather than refined-grain crackers. And, always use whole-wheat flour for baking.

Aim to eat at least three ounces of 100 percent whole-grain foods per day. (One ounce is about a slice of bread, one cup of breakfast cereal or 1/2 cup of cooked rice or pasta.)

At first, whole-grain items may take some getting used to, but stick to it. Once you become accustomed to whole-grain products, you’ll find that you prefer them to refined-grain options.

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