

FROM THE NUTRITIONIST

Andrea Hart, RDN, CDN



Whole Grain Goodness

High carbohydrate foods like grains sometimes get a bad rap because many people believe that carbs aren't healthy. However, carbohydrates are the human body's preferred source of energy.

Carbohydrates are found in various food groups, including vegetables, fruits, and dairy foods — but grains are actually the world's single biggest source of food energy, and many countries count one or more grains as staple foods. Not only are grains not bad for us, some grains have been shown to provide a number of health benefits. But it's important to choose wisely.

Any food made from wheat, rice, oats, cornmeal, barley or another cereal grain is a grain product. Bread, pasta, oatmeal, rice, breakfast cereals and tortillas are some examples. Grains are divided into two subgroups, Whole Grains and Refined Grains. Whole grains contain the entire grain kernel — the bran, germ and endosperm. Examples of whole grains include whole-wheat flour, oatmeal, quinoa, whole cornmeal and brown rice. On the other hand, refined grains have been milled, a process that removes the bran and germ. This is done to give grains a finer texture and improve their shelf life, but it also removes most of the nutrition. Some examples of refined grain products are white flour, white bread and white rice.

Whole grains are packed with nutrients including protein, B vitamins, antioxidants and trace minerals. They are also an important source of fiber, which is an essential nutrient that most Americans don't get enough of. Many studies have shown that people who choose more whole grains and less refined grains are less likely to have many chronic diseases, such as obesity, heart disease, type 2 diabetes and some types of cancer. For health benefits, experts recommend making at least half of the grains you eat whole grains.

Choosing whole grains can take some getting used to, but it isn't difficult once you get the hang of it. Here are some tips for choosing whole grains:

- You can't always tell right away — various ingredients can be added to a food to change how it looks, so the color of a food is not an indication that it is a whole grain food.
- Check ingredient lists — and choose products that name a whole grain ingredient first, like whole wheat, brown rice, whole oats, and whole grain cornmeal.
- Read carefully — foods labeled as “multigrain” or “100% wheat” may not be 100% whole grain.
- Enriched isn't much better — refined flours are often enriched, which means that some of the vitamins are added back after processing — but not all of the nutrients are added back, so enriched grains are not as nutritious as whole grains.
- Choose the right amount — it's possible to eat too much of any food, even healthful ones like whole grains. Most adults should aim for 5-6 ounces of grains per day; those with higher calorie needs may require more.

Andrea Hart, registered dietitian nutritionist and New York state-certified dietitian/nutritionist, is available for free, confidential, one-on-one counseling and as a speaker or facilitator for campus groups, panels or classes.