

Health Insights Today

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Whole Grains: Making the Transition

By Daniel Redwood, DC

Whole grains are a very important part of a healthy diet, a wide range of respected sources agree. From the Surgeon General to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, from the American Heart Association to the American Cancer Society, from the American Chiropractic Association to the American Medical Association, all major health organizations with policies on nutrition wholeheartedly recommend whole grains to anyone who will listen.

Unfortunately, most Americans aren't listening, or aren't acting on what they hear. Wheat is the grain we eat most (think bread and pasta), but as of 1997, only 2 percent of the 150 pounds of wheat flour consumed by the average American each year take the form of whole wheat flour. Refined white flour lacks the nutrient-filled germ and the fiber-rich bran layer of the whole wheat kernel. Research shows that eating grains in this weakened form contributes to a variety of health problems, from constipation to cardiovascular disease.

Making the Change

If you are among the majority who did not grow up eating whole grains at home, you can do the right thing for your health without much difficulty by using whole grain forms of wheat, rice and corn in almost all situations where you're accustomed to using the more processed, less nutritious forms. I grew up eating white rice, but when I was in college I learned about the superior nutritional quality of brown rice. I made the change immediately, found that I loved it and never looked back. I also grew up on white bread, but made the transition to whole grain breads as well. On those rare occasions when I have white bread (at restaurants, mainly), it usually seems a pale imitation of the real thing.

As to whether you'll have to master esoteric cooking skills to make the transition, think of it this way—if you have the cooking skills to boil white rice, you're fully capable of boiling brown rice. It just takes a bit longer to cook. Similarly, if you know how to spread peanut butter and jelly on a slice of white bread, those skills fully qualify you to spread PB&J onto 100 percent whole wheat bread. The whole grain versions are healthier in many ways, and their fiber content also means that you'll feel full sooner. That means you'll take in fewer calories and therefore be less likely to put on unwanted weight. The empty or nearly empty calories of processed foods like sugar, white flour, soft drinks and alcohol are a major factor (along with excessive fat intake and too little exercise) behind the alarming fact that two-thirds of American adults are overweight or obese.

You may be eating whole grains already without realizing it. When you have oatmeal for breakfast, you're eating a whole grain cereal. Popcorn for a snack? Whole grain, too. It shouldn't come as a surprise; after all, those are whole corn kernels you're putting into the popper. Though the fully-popped version looks and tastes quite different from the yellow-gold kernels, nothing has been removed in the popping. It's all still there—bran, germ, and everything else.

Getting Used to Something New

It's true that you'll have to get used to some new tastes in order to eat your grains in their natural, whole grain form. Some people find this more challenging than others. Having made such changes myself, and having seen family members, friends and patients go through their own personal transitions, I'd say that for the less adventurous types, it's a good idea to allow your taste buds a bit of time to adapt. That might mean trying breads that are half white flour and half whole wheat. It might mean alternating brown rice and white rice dishes during a transitional period of a month or two.

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But the goal is to shift to whole grains as fully as possible. The federal government's health agencies, seeking to be practical and understanding that for many people, change only comes gradually, recommend that people shift their diets so that at least 50 percent of grains are in the whole grain form. Remember, the current American white-to-whole grain ratio is something like 95:5, so 50:50 would be a large change in a healthy direction. But why stop there? It would be healthier by far to flip the current ratio completely, so that 95 percent of dietary grains are eaten in a whole grain form, which is what my family and many of my friends have done. Unless you are afflicted with specific grain intolerances like celiac disease or serious gluten sensitivity, or are allergic to wheat or other grains, that shouldn't be much of a problem.

Even those with gluten sensitivity (gluten is the protein in wheat, rye, corn, barley and some other grains) can eat whole grains, as long as they limit themselves to gluten-free grains like brown rice or the lesser-known quinoa. My wife and I recently had friends over for dinner who are on a gluten-free diet, and while that called for some extra culinary creativity on our part, we were able to put together a meal that everyone enjoyed.

Preparing Tasty Foods

The key is to find recipes that you like. If you like white rice Mexican-style with beans, peppers and chili sauce, you'll almost certainly enjoy it after substituting brown rice for white. If you like Italian dishes with white pasta, vegetables and marinara, try whole wheat pasta while keeping the other ingredients just as before. One word of warning on whole wheat pasta—some brands are richly flavorful but others taste like cardboard. As is true of many other foods, it's worth finding the right brand. If you get it wrong the first time, don't assume that all other brands will be that way. We don't endorse particular brands at *Health Insights Today*, so my best advice is to look in the pasta section at a good health food store, where there's frequent turnover of product on the shelf. Or, if you can find a local Italian food place that makes whole wheat pasta fresh daily, that would be ideal.

As far as whole grain breads are concerned, in most areas of the U.S. you can find 100 percent whole wheat breads in the supermarket as well as the health food store. In many areas, local bakers provide fresh whole grain breads daily.

A few more points about whole vs. processed (white) grains:

1. Many processed grains (white flour, white rice) are labeled "enriched." This means that after many naturally-occurring nutrients are removed in processing, a few synthetic vitamins are added back. While this may enable some people on poor diets to avoid outright nutritional deficiencies, it can be compared to someone who takes \$100 from you and then "enriches" you by giving you \$10.
2. Despite claims by a few overenthusiastic health food advocates, it is not true that white flour and white bread are poisonous, toxic or entirely devoid of nutrients. They aren't nearly as good for you as the whole grain versions, but they do deliver some nutritional benefits. White bread even retains some fiber, although only about one-third the amount that you'll find in 100 percent whole grain bread.
3. Labels can be confusing. "Wheat" bread does not mean "whole wheat" bread. Unless the label says "100 percent whole wheat," the bread includes some processed white flour, possibly accounting for most or all of it. Remember, the law requires that ingredients be listed in order of quantity, so if the first ingredient is "whole wheat flour," and "wheat flour" is listed second, third or fourth, that means you're getting a bread that is mainly whole grain. Personally, except in very rare circumstances, I won't buy a bread that isn't 100 percent whole grain.

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