Whole Grains – Why, What and How

by Janet Hackert, Regional Nutrition and Health Education Specialist

Many people know it is important for good health to eat whole grains – to reduce the risk of stroke and heart disease, type 2 diabetes and some types of cancer. But sometimes it is hard to know what a whole grain is and how to add them to a meal or snack. Here are some ideas.

The 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends that we make at least half the grain foods we eat whole grains. Because the entire kernel of grain is included in these foods, more of the nutrients that grain foods offer naturally are retained. These include the fiber, iron, selenium, and many of the B vitamins such as niacin, riboflavin, thiamin, B-6 and others.

To know if a food is a whole grain, look at the ingredients list. These ingredients are listed according to their weight, with the most by weight listed first. If the whole grain is first, the food is considered a whole grain.

Words to watch for may include the word “whole” itself or not, depending on the grain. Whole wheat, whole rye and so on are obvious examples. Less conspicuous are other whole grains such as popcorn, bulgur, wheat berries (which simply refers to the kernels of wheat themselves), amaranth, triticale, teff, oatmeal or oats, quinoa, millet, brown rice and buckwheat. Watch out for wording that might seem like a whole grain, or related to a whole grain, but really is not, such as cracked, fortified, enriched or stoneground. Also note that 100% wheat, for example, does not indicate whether it is whole wheat or refined wheat.

For more information about fitting whole grains into an eating plan, go to choosemyplate.gov and search for whole grains. There is a list of simple tips for making healthier choices in meals and snacks. According to the April 2015 issue of Tufts University Health and Nutrition Letter, “Fewer than 5% of Americans consume the minimum recommended amount of whole grains, which is about three ounces per day.” At choosemyplate.gov, there is a chart showing how many ounces of whole grains and total grains a person needs depending on their situation. It also shows what counts for an ounce of various foods. For example, a slice of bread is typically one ounce and a large (dense) bagel counts as four ounces. A half cup of cooked grains (e.g., rice, bulgur, quinoa, couscous or pasta) counts for one ounce.

Wholegrainscouncil.org has a wide assortment of recipes from Baja Fish Tacos (with quinoa) to Rye Crispbread Mini Pizzas, and even whole grain salads, snacks and desserts. Try simply switching from a refined grain to a whole grain in an old stand-by (like replacing some or all white pasta with whole wheat pasta) or get daring with some new grains and new recipes.

For more information on whole grains or any other topic, please contact me, Janet Hackert, at 660-425-6434 or HackertJ@missouri.edu or your local University of Missouri Extension office.

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