

[washingtonpost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com)

A primer on whole grains: What they are, why they're important and how to find them

By Jenna Birch

8-10 minutes

According to the Department of Health and Human Services' [Dietary Guidelines for 2015-2020](#), adults should consume six servings of grains daily, at least 50 percent of which should be made up of whole grains. The [recent CDC report](#) reveals, however, that whole grains are just 15.8 percent of total grain intake for the average American adult. So what are whole grains, and how can Americans get more of them?

What are whole grains?

Grains include oat, wheat, rice, barley, rye, bulgur, buckwheat, amaranth, farro, quinoa, millet, sorghum, teff, triticale, farro and spelt. In their whole form, they contain three parts: the bran, the endosperm and the germ.

Most of the products on grocery store shelves, however — think bread, pasta, white rice, bagels, cookies and pastries — are made of refined grains rather than whole grains. “Refined grains are grains in which the bran and germ have been removed to help extend shelf life and vary texture and flavor,” says Kelly Hogan, a

registered dietitian and clinical nutrition and wellness manager of Mount Sinai's Dubin Breast Center of the Tisch Cancer Institute.

The downside is that by removing the bran and germ, processing also removes most of the fiber and nutrients [found in a grain](#). The bran, for example, is rich in fiber, B vitamins and antioxidants. The germ is loaded with vitamins, minerals, proteins and [phytochemicals](#), or plant-based nutrients such as phenolic and flavonoids. The endosperm contains starchy carbs, with only a little bit of nutrient content.

Why are whole grains important?

Consuming whole grains is a good way to ensure you're getting fiber and important nutrients that support "countless body processes that regulate our day-to-day function," says [Jessica Cording](#), a registered dietitian and integrative nutrition coach.

[Fiber](#) keeps you fuller for longer so you don't overeat. Fiber also lowers the risk of long-term health conditions such as cardiovascular disease, Type 2 diabetes and obesity. "Fiber found in whole grains, especially soluble fiber, has been shown to reduce cholesterol levels by increasing excretion of cholesterol from the body," Hogan says. "It also slows down digestion to help keep blood sugar steady and helps keep bowels moving regularly."

The [B vitamins](#) in whole grains, including thiamine, niacin and riboflavin, are crucial metabolism aids. They help the body use the energy found in protein, fat and carbs. Folate, another B vitamin, assists the body in building new red blood cells. This nutrient is especially important for pregnant women or women trying to become pregnant, reducing the risk of some birth defects.

The [phytochemicals](#) — many of which are antioxidants — that are abundant in whole grains fight inflammation. [Research](#) has shown that whole grain intake can reduce the risk of death from inflammatory diseases (not including heart disease or cancer).

But when it comes to heart disease and cancer, whole grains are no slouches. [A 2016 BMJ meta-analysis](#) claimed there's evidence that eating whole grains can lead to “a reduced risk of coronary heart disease, cardiovascular disease, and total cancer, and mortality from all causes, respiratory diseases, infectious diseases, diabetes, and all non-cardiovascular, non-cancer causes.”

It's usually best to try to get the vitamins and minerals you need by eating whole grains, rather than taking supplements or consuming products fortified with these nutrients. “In general, getting your nutrients as they naturally occur, and in less processed foods, helps ensure that you get all the nutrients you need on a daily basis,” says Melina Jampolis, a physician nutritionist specialist in California. “Many whole grains are rich in fiber, vitamins, minerals and phytonutrients, as well as low in sugar and saturated fat; they are a very good choice as part of a well-balanced, nutrient-dense diet.”

How to find whole grains

It's not always easy to differentiate between whole grain products and refined grain products, so it's best to check labels. Even the most rustic-looking bread might be made with refined flour.

According to the Whole Grain Council, you should look for words such as, “100 percent whole [grain],” “whole [grain],” “whole wheat,” “oats,” “stoneground whole [grain],” and “brown rice.” You should

skip packages that say “enriched,” “degerminated,” “wheat flour,” “bran” or “wheat germ” on the label; these are not whole grains.

Wheat: As you look for whole-wheat bread, pastas and crackers (cracked wheat, which you see on some labels, is whole wheat that’s simply been split open), compare items. “Generally speaking, you want to make sure that a whole grain is the first ingredient listed,” Cording says. “Then, ideally, I recommend choosing a product with at least three grams of fiber per serving.”

If you’re in a bakery without product labels, ask employees how they make the bread and which type of flour they use, Hogan says. “Notice the content of other grains like rye, oats and seed, as well, which are great and can also add fiber,” she says.

Rice: Skip white rice, which is the rice grain without its hull, bran or germ. Though brown is the typical color of whole grain rice, including varieties such as basmati and jasmine, whole grain versions can also be black, red and purple. “The arsenic in brown rice is a concern, especially for young children — but as long as you have a variety of whole grains in your diet, this should not be an issue” for healthy adults, Jampolis says.

Corn: Hogan says corn is “technically both” a vegetable and a grain. The vegetable is the fresh corn you would find on a cob; the grain is the dried kernel (making popcorn a whole grain). When purchasing cornmeal, [grits](#), corn cakes and tortillas [look for](#) made “made with ‘whole grain corn’ or ‘whole grain cornmeal’ ” on the label.

Oats: Steel cut and rolled oats are healthy whole grain options. In the case of instant oats, which are still whole grain, make sure there’s no added sugar — or skip altogether. “Being much more

processed to allow for much faster cooking, instant oats raise blood sugar more quickly and have a higher glycemic index, so they're not as healthy as the former two," Jampolis says. "If you really want to choose the healthiest option, choose plain steel cut or rolled oats and add your own flavor and sweetness like cinnamon or Stevia."

Other options: Other varieties classified as whole grains include barley, rye, quinoa and buckwheat. Jampolis loves barley and quinoa for their nutrient profile "in side dishes and salads" you can whip up at home. Sorghum, freekeh, amaranth, millet and wheat berries are also whole grains to look up if you're feeling adventurous.

Getting to 50 percent

[The Agriculture Department](#) recommends that adults have six one-ounce servings of grains a day, and Jampolis says it isn't difficult to achieve the goal of getting half those servings from whole grains. "A serving size is about a slice of bread or half-cup of grains, so if you aim for three servings of whole grains daily and limit the refined grains like white bread, regular pasta, baked goods, and so on, to three servings a day or less, you will be fine," she says. "I think it is critical to note that many of [nutritional] studies are observational, and the key message is to replace refined grains with whole grains, not add whole grains into the diet on top of the grains you are already eating."

Consuming more home-cooked meals can help you balance your grain intake, Hogan says. She also suggests following more of a plant-based diet. "This, by the way, can absolutely include animal products, just more plants than anything else," she says. "Start slow by opting for whole grain versions of crackers; high-fiber, whole

grain cereal; and whole-heat breads and pastas. Then, as you get used to it, you can branch out and cook with a new grain like quinoa or farro.” You can also use these grains in different ways. “They are delicious in salads, stir fries and more.”