

Whole grains

Surely no one can have missed the 5 a day fruit and vegetable campaign, but are you aware that there are similar recommendations for whole grains – we should aim to eat 3 portions of whole grain foods a day!

These recommendations are based on well-researched work and with clear evidence they are backed by the Department of Health. According to a survey one third of the population do not eat any whole grain foods at all.

All grains are whole grains when harvested. It is during the milling process that grains are stripped of the bran and the germ, leaving the endosperm. The original grain consists of the starchy endosperm, the fibre-rich bran and the germ. If during the milling process these three components are kept in their original proportions, they qualify as whole grains.

This means that brown or multigrain bread or even some common high fibre foods (e.g. cereals) may not necessarily be whole-grain.

Whole grain foods contain fibre, but in addition many other nutrients. It is the bran and the germ component of grains that have the better nutrient values. Look out for the word “whole grain” rather than “wholemeal” on the label for your bread. Oats, corn and rye flours are also whole-grain.

Whole grains do not just contain fibre. We have known for some years now that fibre in whole grain foods helps promote digestive health. They contain protective antioxidants in similar amounts to some fruits and vegetables. Corn has twice the amount of antioxidant activity than apples. In more recent studies we have learnt that whole grains may help reduce the risk of heart disease, cancer and diabetes. Whole grains may lower triglycerides (fat in the blood) and slow down the clogging of arteries. Whole grains improve insulin control because of lower glycaemic index. Whole grains are low in fat and high in fibre and helps to make us feel fuller for longer, helping with weight management. All of which reduces the risk of chronic diseases!

Count the portions of grains (starchy foods) you eat per day, and make it your goal to have at least half from whole grain foods. Many whole grain products now have the whole grain logo on the packaging. If you are looking for whole grains, most supermarkets now have a whole foods section too.

This is an example of how to include three portions of whole grains per day:

- Whole grain cereals for breakfast (look at the packaging to see the logo)
- 1 whole grain pita bread – for your lunchbox
- 3 heaped tablespoons of whole wheat pasta as a side dish for dinner
- plain popcorn as a snack

Other foods which will help get more whole grains into your diet include:

- whole grain flours for baking e.g. pancakes and muffins
- whole grain crackers
- home made pizza bases made with whole grain flour
- whole grain wraps
- brown rice with stir fry

- wild rice
- bulgar wheat
- barley soup

If the idea of having 3 whole grains per day tempts you, remember the recommendation is – at least 3 whole grains per day, you may eat more!