

In Defense of Whole Grains

Andrew Merle for Medium Lifestyle
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There are several popular diets these days that prohibit eating any grains. In particular, The Paleo Diet, The Ketogenic Diet, and Whole30 Diet are three of the hottest diets right now, and none of them allow for any grains.

It is true that cutting out grains will help with weight loss in the short term, but eliminating *whole* grains is detrimental to long-term health.

The evidence clearly shows that whole grains promote health and should be a part of any effective eating plan.

Specifically, eating just 2–3 portions of whole grains per day has been shown to reduce the risk of getting a heart attack or prematurely dying of heart disease by 30%, and lower the risk of all forms of cardiovascular disease (heart attack, stroke, or the need for a procedure to bypass or open a clogged artery) by 21%.

Those numbers mean that eating enough whole grains daily is as powerful as high blood pressure medications in alleviating hypertension.

Considering 75 million American adults have high blood pressure—one in every three American adults—we would be smart to consume more whole grains, not less.

But whole grains do much more than just lower blood pressure.

Eating at least 70 grams of whole grains daily has been shown to lower the risk of total mortality by 22% and reduce the risk of cancer mortality by 20%.

Whole grain consumption has also been shown to lower cholesterol and protect against inflammation in the body.

It should come as no surprise that people are encouraged to load up on whole grains on the Mediterranean Diet, which was just named the #1 healthiest diet by a panel of the nation's foremost nutrition experts.

Whole grains also play a key role in centenarians' diets in every Blue Zones region in the world. That means the longest-lived people in the world eat whole grains daily.

Grains in general get a bad rap because of all the processed refined grains that exist in our food system today.

Refined grains (like white bread and white rice) are stripped of valuable nutrients in the refining process, including the removal of the germ and bran.

That is a problem because bran is filled with fiber and other nutrients that help regulate blood sugar, prevent blood clots, and lower cholesterol.

And the germ is packed with healthy fats, vitamin E, B vitamins, phytochemicals, and antioxidants.

Once the bran and germ are removed, the only part of the grain that is left is the soft, chewy, easy-to-digest endosperm. That's why white flour is fluffy and tastes so good, but it is missing most of the nutrition (and food manufacturers add lots of other junk to refined grains these days).

Whole grains offer a “complete package” of health benefits, but all three parts of the whole grain—the bran, germ, and endosperm—need to be intact to reap those benefits.

Whereas refined grains are associated with a range of negative health outcomes, from obesity to diabetes to heart disease.

It is therefore critical to select and eat actual whole grains, instead of the processed and refined stuff.

By now, hopefully you are convinced of the importance of whole grains, but it can still be confusing to buy truly nutritious whole grain products.

That is because words like multigrain, whole grain, and whole wheat show up on nearly every package of food these days, and it is very misleading.

To help simplify the process, your best bet is to choose an unprocessed whole grain in its natural form (which means just one ingredient).

Popular, easy-to-find unprocessed whole grains include brown rice, barley, corn, quinoa, oats, rye, wheat berries, and wild rice.

If you do opt for whole grain bread or pasta with more than one ingredient, you need to look on the back of the label and perform some basic math to ensure you are really getting whole grains without the unhealthy additives.

Specifically, look at the label and make sure the serving size ratio of carbs to fiber is equal to or less than 5-to-1 (for example, if you divided 15 grams of carbs by 3 grams of fiber like in the Ezekiel 4:9 sprouted whole grain bread, that would equal 5 and would pass the test).

Following the 5-to-1 rule is the way to buy healthy whole grain products, according to Dr. Michael Greger, author of the groundbreaking book *How Not To Die*.

Whole grains should make up roughly 1/4 of your overall diet, according to the Harvard Healthy Eating Plate, the official dietary advice from Harvard doctors and medical professors (fruits and vegetables should account for at least half your plate, and the remaining 1/4 should be healthy protein).

In general, you want to aim for at least three servings of whole grains per day (one serving is equal to half cup of cooked brown rice, one slice of whole grain bread, or a cup of whole grain cereal).

I typically eat two slices of whole grain toast in the morning (topped with olive oil or peanut butter) to cover off on two of the servings, and then I try to add in some brown rice, quinoa, corn, or whole grain pasta for lunch or dinner. Oatmeal is another easy option to start your day with whole grains. And popcorn (unflavored and without added salt) is an incredibly simple whole grain snack.

It doesn't matter which whole grains you eat, as long as you eat enough of them overall. Select the whole grains you like best.

Don't be confused by trendy diets that eliminate all grains. You might lose some weight in the short term, but it's not worth sacrificing your long-term health.

A variety of whole grains should be included in any healthy eating plan. True whole grains are nutrient-dense and protective against many of our most dreaded diseases.

Processed refined grains should be avoided, but *you should be eating whole grains every day* for optimum health.



Andrew Merle: I write about living well, including good habits for happiness, health, productivity, and success.