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Getting All the Benefits of Grains

As you might have heard, the new MyPyramid food guide recommends that at least half the grains and grain products we eat should be made from whole grains. That is because whole grain foods give us many more nutrition and health benefits than just the carbohydrate energy of refined grains. If you eat foods made mostly from white flour and white rice, all you get is the starch. The rest of the grain, the good stuff, has been taken away. Here's what you're missing.

There is fiber in whole grains, mostly in the outer skin of the grain. It helps limit both constipation and diarrhea. The fiber in oats and barley is particularly helpful in lowering blood cholesterol levels. Fiber also helps to slow down how fast we digest a food. That's good because a slower digestion means a slower rise in blood sugar, and less insulin needed. That's crucial for diabetics, and very important for those of us who don't want to become diabetic. People who eat lots of fiber usually have lower insulin levels after eating, and are more sensitive to their insulin.

Whole grains also still have their germ. That's inside, the part of the seed that would sprout into a new plant. The germ has lots of minerals, including magnesium. Some researchers think it is also part of the diabetes control picture.

The germ also contains the oils, which are mostly the healthy kind, and vitamin E. People who eat lots of fiber and whole grains have a much lower risk of heart disease. They also have a 20% to 40% lower risk of colon, rectal, stomach and pancreatic cancers. Whole grains might also help protect us women from some types of uterine cancer.

If you are ready to go past whole wheat bread, there are lots of choices. If you want a healthier dessert, cook whole barley, buckwheat, rice or oats with vanilla, cinnamon or ginger. Sweeten with a touch of honey, or use artificial sweetener. Add some dried fruit and fat free yogurt topping.

To include whole grains as part of the main meal, cook them in chicken broth or soup stock. Saute a bit of onion or garlic before you add the broth and grains to the pot. Toasting the grains in a dry skillet or with a bit of oil before you add the onion will change the flavor a little too. Use like rice, or mix cooked whole grains into meatballs, meatloaf, salads, soups and stews. If you don't tell them, your family might never notice the difference. But their health will!

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