Hunting for whole grains

Dear Alice,
Here's my question...

Where in the grocery store do I find whole grains? I can easily buy carrots, celery, apples, bananas, etc. Does whole grain come in a convenient package that I can put in my lunch bag or quickly unwrap for dinner?

Thanks, David

Answer

Dear David,

Even the savviest of shoppers can be fooled by some of the products on the market today. Food labels can be confusing. Did you know that when a claim appears on a food item stating, for example, that whole grains reduce the risk of heart disease and certain cancers, only 51 percent of its grain contents needs to be whole grain? A little background information will be helpful to you as you navigate your way through the grocery store looking for easy and convenient whole grain foods.

So, what exactly is a whole grain? A grain contains three parts, the bran, endosperm, and germ. The bran is the outer layer, which is high in fiber and B vitamins. The endosperm is primarily starch, or carbohydrates, which turn into sugar in our bodies when we eat. The germ is the seed for a new plant and it contains B vitamins, protein, minerals, and healthy oils. When grain is processed, the bran and germ are removed, leaving only the endosperm or starch. This is essentially why whole grains are more nutritious.

And how do we figure out if a food is made from whole grains? It's easy to be tricked into thinking a food is a whole grain when it's not. For example, if an ingredient is listed as unbleached wheat flour, it is still refined flour and not a whole grain. One way to determine if a product is whole grain is if it has a Whole Grain Stamp from the Whole Grains Council. This identifies it at as containing whole grains. However, if there is no stamp, the key way to determine if a product is whole grain can be found in the nutrition label list of ingredients. If the phrase "whole" appears as part of the FIRST ingredient in the ingredient section of the food label, such as "whole wheat flour" or "whole oats," it is likely that it is a whole grain product. Words that are often indicators of a whole grain product also include "stoneground whole," "brown rice," and "wheatberries." Be wary of items listed without the word "whole" before, such as durum wheat or multigrain, because they may not be actual whole grains. You can
also visit the Whole Grains Council [2], which is a good resource for additional information regarding whole grains and packaging, particularly words you may see on packages and how to identify which are whole grain and which are not.

As far as whole grains coming in a convenient package that can be grabbed off the shelf, let's start in the bread and cereal aisle since these items are the main types of food that offer immediate edibility of whole grains. Next we take a walk to the pasta aisle followed by the aisle containing rice and other whole grains, such as barley and quinoa, which typically involve some cooking time. However, many grocery stores now offer areas where you can find all of these whole grains prepared for you, so the final stop is the hot and cold prepared foods area.

For more tips about healthy eating and whole grain choices, check out these whole grain eating tips [3] from Myplate.Gov!

Hope this clears up some of the confusion,

Alice!

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