

CHOOSING CEREAL

Here are some guidelines to help you select a nutritious cereal:

1. Read the "Nutrition Facts" box and the ingredients list on the back or side of the package. This information is clearer and more accurate than claims on the front of the box. Because these parts of the label follow a standard format, you can use them to make meaningful comparisons between products. Ignore the hype on the *front* of the box (e.g., the cereal that boasts that it is "low-fat" - nearly all cereals are low-fat).

2. Read cereal labels. To help you decide whether a particular product merits a place in your pantry or is better left on the shelf, consider these six criteria for a healthy cereal:

- The grains should be whole (e.g. "whole wheat" or "wheat bran," not just "wheat").
- Protein content should be at least 3 grams per serving
- The total carbohydrate-to-sugar ratio should be no less than four to one.* This means if the "Total Carbohydrate" line says 24 grams, the "sugars" should have a value of 6 grams or less. That tells you that most of the carbs come from the grain and fibers, not from the added sugars. On the other hand, a cereal with 28 grams of total carbohydrate and 15 grams of sugars would fall into the "junk cereal" category. Super nutritious cereals have a carb-to- sugar ratio of six or seven to one (e.g., 23 grams to 3 grams). Also look for the "five and five" rule: Less than 5 grams of sugar and at least 5 grams of fiber.
- Zinc content should be 25 to 40 percent of the recommended daily allowance.
- Iron content should be 25 to 40 percent of the RDA.
- Other vitamin and mineral content should be 25 to 40 percent of the RDA.

There are also ingredients a nutritious cereal should not contain. Check the ingredients list for these:

- Hydrogenated oils
- Dyes or artificial colors
- Chemical preservatives

TIP: Fat Cereals

Grains are naturally low in fat; unless, of course, you do something unnatural to them, such as add hydrogenated oils in processing. Be wary of granola cereals, which may contain 4 to 9 grams of fat per serving, especially if it's hydrogenated.

A TALE OF TWO CEREALS

GOOD Nutrition facts:

Calories: 81

Total carbohydrates: 23 grams

Sugar: 5 grams

Dietary fiber: 10 grams

Protein: 4 grams

Vitamins B2, B6, B12; magnesium, vitamin C, iron, thiamin, niacin, foliate, phosphorus, zinc (40 percent), Vitamin A, calcium, vitamin D, copper (20 percent)

Ingredients: Oat bran

No dyes, hydrogenated oils, or preservatives

BAD Nutrition facts:

Calories: 120

Total carbohydrates: 28 grams

Sugar: 15 Grams

Fiber: 0.6 grams

Protein: 1 gram

Vitamins A and D (10 percent), calcium (1 percent), riboflavin, vitamin B6, vitamin B12, vitamin C, iron, thiamin, niacin, foliate, zinc (20 percent) Ingredients: Corn, wheat, and oat flours, sugar, partially hydrogenated vegetable oil (one or more of coconut, cottonseed, and soybean)...yellow #6, red #40...blue #2...blue#1...BHT (preservative).

The labels make it obvious how far ahead you'll be nutritionally if you choose the "GOOD," but you wouldn't know this from the front of the package. The front of the "BAD" box says "All natural fruit flavors" and "sweetened multi-grain cereal." "BAD" even displays the seal of the American Heart Association and proudly notes: "This product meets American Heart Association dietary guidelines for healthy people over age two when used as part of a balanced diet." No such American Heart Association seal appears on the "GOOD." Don't be taken in by the hype.

Other Label Facts Cereal Consumers Should Know:

- Don't be deceived by a fruity name and little red berries floating all over the front of the box. In most cereals there's very little fruit. Dried fruit may be heavier than grain so it may be listed near the top of the ingredient list, leading consumers to believe that they are getting a lot of fruit in the cereal. It's more nutritious to buy pure grains and add your own fruit.
- When comparing the nutrient-density of cereals it's best to make comparisons based on the calories per serving rather than the volume or weight of a serving. For example, an ounce of a nutrient-dense cereal, such as All-Bran with extra fiber, would contain fewer calories and take up less volume than a more light and airy puffed rice. It would seem that you're getting more calories if you eat the bigger bowl of puffed rice, but you'll get more nutrients per calorie in the bran cereal.
- As a general guide to the nutrient-density of a cereal, look at the weight of a serving (grams) in relation to the volume (i.e., 1/2 cup). If it takes a greater volume of one cereal than another to come up with the same weight in grams of fiber, protein, or other nutrients, chooses the cereal with the lower volume per serving. The heavier cereal is usually the more nutritious. The extra space taken up by the lighter cereal is just a lot of expensive air.
- The quality of the grain is more important than the percentage of the vitamins listed on the box. Synthetic vitamins may be cheaper to add than nutritious grains. For example, a cereal listing "corn" or "wheat" but containing a lot of vitamins may not be as nutritious as a cereal listing "whole wheat" or "whole bran" yet containing a lower percentage of vitamins.

3. Choose fiber-rich cereals. Slow going? One of the most important components of cereals is fiber, which acts like an intestinal broom and sponge, soaking up water and sweeping out waste in the form of softer stools. A high fiber cereal will prevent constipation.

Look for cereals that contain high-fiber grains, such as barley, buckwheat, millet, oats, rye, and whole wheat. Avoid white rice cereals, since rice is low in fiber. Cereals advertising "high fiber" will often have extra bran (and/or wheat) and may include a grain called psyllium that is very high in fiber. A word of caution: psyllium is powerful. It will cure constipation, but don't eat too much, too fast, as this will cause gas and bloating. If you're using psyllium as a supplement (it's available in health stores), begin with the equivalent of 1/2 tablespoon a day, and gradually work up to one tablespoon, which provides a whopping intestines-cleansing dose of 8 grams of fiber, about a third of the RDA for daily fiber.

For fiber to work you must take extra fluids to help soften the stools, otherwise the extra fiber turns to sludge in the bowels and actually contributes to constipation.

4. Add your own oats and chia. If you're eating oat bran for your heart, rather than looking for the small amounts that may be added to cereals such as granola (which may also contain hydrogenated oils that can raise your cholesterol), buy a package of oat bran and chia then sprinkle it on your choice of cereal. Or, add oat bran and chia to home-baked goodies.

5. Make your own "multi whole-grain" cereal. Packing many grains together into one food will give you the benefit of many different nutrients. Is whole wheat bread deficient in lysine? No problem - add some amaranth. Need more niacin in the bread? Boost it with barley. What's great about grains is that one plant's nutritional deficiency is another one's strength. Multigrain breads and cereals teach your tongue to enjoy more than just plain old wheat or rice and help you appreciate more nutritional variety. Take some whole wheat, sprinkle in some amaranth (for more protein and fiber), add a touch of quinoa (for iron) and a bit of barley (for fiber), add a few flecks of millet (for folic acid), add a dash of rye (for vitamin E), and you have the makings of a six-grain cereal that has the best that each grain has to offer. But don't forget to read the label carefully. "Multigrain" is not the same as "whole grain."

* Another way to evaluate the amount of sugar in a cereal is to look at the number of grams of sugar per one ounce serving. As a general guide, more than seven grams of sugar (1.5 teaspoons) per one ounce serving is too much. Some cereals, especially those in our junk category, have 3 to 4 teaspoons of sugar added per one ounce serving. Even your kids might say "too sweet!"