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 perplexed by some of the products on the market today. All sorts of foods have whole grains in them, but some can be easier to identify than others. The majority of foods will have an ingredients list on the packaging. Looking at this list can help indicate whether or not the product has whole grains in it. With that said, a little background information may be helpful to navigate your way through the grocery store as you look for easy and convenient whole grain foods.

So, what exactly is a whole grain? A whole 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 turns into sugar in the body when digested. The germ is the seed for a new plant and it contains B vitamins, antioxidants, protein, minerals, and healthy oils. When grain is processed, the bran and germ are usually removed, leaving only the endosperm or starch. This is essentially why whole grains are generally considered to be more nutritious. In addition, some look for the word multigrain, as many people believe it to contain more nutrients or believe it to be synonymous with whole grain. However, all that the term multigrain really means is that the product is made using many different types of grains, but not necessarily all or any whole grains.

A key way to determine if a product contains whole grains may be found on the 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’s likely that there are whole grains in the product. Other words that may be indicators of a whole grain product include "stoneground whole," "brown rice," and "wheatberries." It’s wise to be wary of items listed without the word "whole" before, such as durum wheat or multigrain because they may not be actual whole grains. One of the easiest ways to determine if a product is whole grain is if it has a Whole Grain Stamp [2] from the Whole Grains Council. The Whole Grains Council is a consumer advocacy group of concerned millers, manufacturers, scientists, and chefs that works with manufacturers, consumers, and the media to increase whole grain education, awareness, and consumption. Three different varieties of the Whole Grain Stamp include the 100% Stamp, the 50%+ Stamp, and the Basic Stamp (meaning the product must contain at least eight grams of whole grains). The Whole Grains Council discusses other words [3] you may see on package labels and how to identify which are and aren’t whole grain. Further, it’s wise to remember that just because a particular food contains whole grains, it may not be a nutrition powerhouse. Considering all of the nutrients in a food can help you determine what may meet your needs.

As far as whole grains coming in a convenient package that can be grabbed off the shelf, you may want to start in the bread and cereal aisle since these items offer immediate munching of whole grains. If you have some time to cook, a walk to the pasta aisle may be next followed by the aisle containing rice and other whole grains, such as barley and quinoa, to meet your whole grain needs. In addition, many grocery stores now offer areas where you can find all of these whole grains prepared for you, so another stop may be the hot and cold prepared foods area. Talk about grab and go!

For more tips about healthy eating and whole grain choices, check out these whole grain eating tips [4] from MyPlate [5]. If you’re struggling to incorporate whole grains into your diet, you may also find it useful to speak with a registered dietitian to help you weave grains you like into your meals!

Hope this clears up some or “whole” of the confusion,

Alice!

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