

## Energy bars <sup>[1]</sup>

Dear Alice,

What are the nutritional benefits, if any, of energy (or power) bars?

— Power Me Up

### Answer

Dear Power Me Up,

Sports bars, energy bars, power bars — call them what you like — a variety of these products are available at grocery stores and in vending machines. Marketing for these bars may have you believing that they can work wonders: some purported benefits include burning of fat, buildup of muscle, and improved athletic performance. In terms of nutritional benefits — well, that all depends on what benefits you are looking for in a snack.

All energy bars provide energy because energy — in the pure sense of the word — refers to calories. As a matter of fact, energy bars were first developed for endurance athletes who had difficulty taking in enough calories to sustain them during their athletic endeavors. True, they are a quick and convenient form of energy or calories. But will these bars energize *you*? Probably not. If you haven't eaten in a while and are feeling slightly fatigued, one of these bars may help take away that sluggishness, but so would a slice of whole wheat toast and a cup of skim milk or juice. However, if you're exhausted due to lack of sleep (for example), an energy bar won't give you any more pep.

On the nutrition tip, some energy bars contain over 400 calories (more than in many candy bars) and up to ten grams of fat. For many people, this may be more than they need or want to take in before exercising. Many energy bars do contain added vitamins, minerals, amino acids, and other important substances, but they are not meal replacements. They do not contain the natural fibers, phytochemicals, and high quality protein found in less-processed foods. For a fraction of the cost, and just as convenient to eat, consider some other snacking options:

- Granola bars (read the labels, some granola bars have loads of added sugars)
- Bananas

- Oranges
- Carrot sticks
- Juice
- Skim milk
- Low-fat yogurt
- Whole grain crackers
- Graham crackers
- Mini-bagels

Energy bars aren't a replacement for a healthy lifestyle; it's still critical to eat a balanced diet, sleep, manage stress, and be physically active in order to achieve optimum performance. So rather than banking on bars, be a smart consumer: consider your caloric needs, choose to eat a balanced diet, read energy bar labels carefully (check for caloric, fat, and sugar content and think how they fit in with your overall diet), and don't be fooled by all the hype.

More power to ya,

Alice!

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