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A bowl of oatmeal a day keeps the cholesterol at bay? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I read on a box of Quaker oats that oatmeal is "like little sponges that soak up extra cholesterol" and that a person can bring his/her cholesterol down to normal or below normal by eating a daily bowl of oatmeal (without milk or butter) and cutting back on high cholesterol foods. Is this true? I don't like oatmeal and want to be certain that this diet is going to work before I force myself to have a daily dose of it. I also get daily exercise (usually walking).

— Haulin' Oats

Answer

Dear Haulin' Oats,

According to the 1990 Nutrition Labeling and Education Act, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) may authorize a health claim only if there is significant scientific agreement that it is true — meaning that the claim must be accurate and not misleading to consumers. In 1997, the FDA allowed whole oat food manufacturers to make the health claim that their products reduce the risk of heart disease. Scientifically, the basis for this assertion is that the dietary fiber found in oats has been shown to help lower cholesterol, one of the risk factors for cardiovascular disease.

Oats contain beta-glucan, a water-soluble fiber thought to decrease LDL (low density lipoprotein, the harmful cholesterol) and total cholesterol. Since soluble fiber has a high water-holding capacity, it becomes goeey when dissolved in water. This feature allows soluble fiber to travel slowly through the digestive tract and attach to bile acids in the intestine, and then carry the acids out of the body as waste. Since bile acids are made from cholesterol, soluble fiber helps with the absorption of less dietary cholesterol.

In order to put the health claim on the food label, the oat item must be whole oat and provide at least 0.75 grams of soluble fiber per serving. In addition, the health claim must also include the words, "Diets low in saturated fat and cholesterol" rather than "Diets high in oats;" otherwise, consumers may think that eating oats is all they need to do to lower their risk of heart disease.

So, how much oats does a person really need to get the health benefits? Research has shown that two servings of oats daily can reduce cholesterol two to three percent beyond what is achieved with a low-fat diet alone. Other sources of soluble fiber may help instead of, or in addition to, the oats. Some examples of dietary soluble fiber include:

- Kidney beans
- Pinto beans
- Brussels sprouts
- Oat bran
- Oranges
- Apples
- Broccoli
- Grapefruit
- Spinach
- Brown rice
- Whole wheat bread
- Grapes

To reduce the risk for heart disease further, it is necessary to keep weight, cholesterol, and blood pressure at healthy levels, don't smoke, and exercise regularly. Also it is beneficial to munch on plenty of fruits, veggies, and whole grains. For more information on healthy eating, you can check out the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) [MyPlate website](#) [2].

Lastly, while oat cereals are part of a healthy eating plan, if you can't stand them, don't force feed yourself. You can incorporate many other strategies and dietary sources of soluble fiber into your lifestyle to achieve better heart health. To life!

Alice!

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