

Whole Grains

Good wheat for the brain

A diet rich in fish, vegetables, fruits, nuts, extra-virgin olive oil, and whole grains significantly improves depression and concentration. You don't need to cut carbs to follow this diet; you just need to shift them to 100% whole grain. Here's how to do that with bread, crackers, rice, pasta, and snacks.

What is a whole grain?

Whole grains are the natural form of wheat before it is "refined" and stripped of its nutrients. The sugars in whole grains are packed into complex carbohydrates that take a while to break down. In contrast, refined and white flours can cause blood sugar to spike, leading to diabetes, inflammation, and sugar cravings. Whole grains are also high in protein and fiber, which helps stabilize appetite, blood sugar, and cholesterol.

Whole grains are full of minerals, vitamins, antioxidants, and phytochemicals that help fight inflammation. Besides improving brain health, they protect against heart disease, stroke, diabetes, obesity, and cancer.

If you've been on a steady diet of white flour, shifting to whole grains will be a challenge, but it won't take long to appreciate the rewards. They have a nutty, richer flavor that may take some getting used to. Focus instead on how you feel 2-3 hours after eating them. Compared to a white bread meal, you're likely to feel less bloated, lighter, and more energized. Eat these grains slowly and you'll find they fill you up quicker than the white varieties. Whole grains are less likely to leave you with sugar cravings that make them hard to put down. Here are some examples:

Whole wheat breads: Products labeled 100% whole wheat including breads, pizza, pita, and English muffins. The label will usually list the specific whole grains it contains, such as whole

wheat, amaranth, barley, buckwheat, millet, oats, bulgur, cornmeal, farro, spelt, rye, sorghum, teff, triticale, wheat, wheat bran, wheat germ.

Rice and pasta: Brown rice, wild rice, and quinoa. Pasta labeled 100% whole wheat. Watch out for additives in packaged brown rice mixes.

Breakfast: Oatmeal, muesli cereal, fiber and bran cereals, porridge. Brands with whole grain options include Fiber One, Ezekiel 4:9, Kashi, and Grape Nuts. Granola cereals are made from oats (a whole grain). Read the nutrition panels to choose products with low sugar, high fiber, and no chemical additives. For breakfast cereals like oatmeal, avoid the "instant" varieties; they often contain as many additives as highly processed foods. Instead, start with plain oats and add your own berries, dried fruit, and natural sweeteners as needed.

Snacks: Crackers made with 100% whole grains, brown rice, or nuts. Chips made from 100% whole grains, nuts, brown rice, or beans. Popcorn (home popped is better than microwaved or bagged popcorn).

Gluten free alternatives: corn, buckwheat, sorghum, teff, millet, amaranth, arrowroot, and oats labeled "gluten free." Flours made from beans and nuts will also work. Quinoa, brown, and wild rice are gluten-free. Avoid whole wheat, rye and barley grains.

Not a whole grain: enriched wheat flour, white bread, products made with white rice (white rice cakes or crackers), white rice, jasmine rice, Arborio rice, gnocchi, water crackers, white pasta, corn flakes, nutri-grain.

Purchasing tips

This diet calls for 100% whole wheat, but many products will sprinkle in a few of those healthy grains, pack the rest with refined flour, and boast that it contains "multigrains" or is "made with whole grains." Here's how to decipher those labels:

These are 100% whole grains...

100% whole wheat. This is the most common type of whole grain. Wheat is the type of grain, and it's 100% whole, so these products pass.

100% white whole wheat also counts – these products start with an albino version of wheat but keep it whole.

100% whole grains. These products contain a variety of grains. That may include wheat as well as other whole grains like amaranth, barley, millet, oats, bulgur, cornmeal, farro, spelt, rye, sorghum, teff, triticale, wheat bran, buckwheat, and wheat germ.

Another sign of a good product is that the first ingredient (or the second one after “water”) on the nutrition panel is “whole grains” or a specific whole grain such as whole wheat, corn, cornmeal, oats, rye, buckwheat, wheat germ, wheat bran, barley, spelt, sorghum, amaranth, millet, bulgur, kañiwa, farro, teff, triticale.

Sprouted breads, such as Ezekiel and Food for Life, are whole grain if they are labeled “100% whole grain,” and most are. Sprouting means that the grains were sprouted in a warm environment rather than baked, a process thought to release more of the grain's health benefits. Sprouted grains need to be kept in the refrigerator or freezer.

If still confused, you can estimate how close it is to a whole grain product by looking at the total carbohydrates and fiber on the nutritional label. Divide the total carbohydrates by 10; this should be equal or less than the fiber. Foods with higher carbohydrates usually don't contain enough whole grains to count. This method is fairly reliable, but not perfect.

If you've narrowed it down to a few good products, here's how to choose between them. Aim for sugar to come in at ingredient number three or four. Chose products with lower salt and sugar.

The Whole Grains Stamp...

Some products are stamped by the Whole Grains Council (wholegrainscouncil.org) as having 100%, 50%, or basic whole grains (the basic category has the least). Only the 100% stamp would count for this diet.

These are not 100%....

“Made with...” or “contains...” whole grains or whole wheat. These are the products that just sprinkle a few in.

Multigrain or 7 grain. Even products with zero whole grains can make this claim, as long as they are made with more than one type of grain.

Wheat bread. These products contain wheat, but not necessarily whole wheat.

Pumpernickel, rye, oat, or oatmeal bread. Although healthy grains appear in their title, these breads are usually stocked with refined flour unless they are labeled “100% whole.”

100% Natural. This could mean many things, but 100% whole grains is not one of them.

Taste Tests

Below are some 100% whole grain products that were endorsed by professional taste-testers and food magazine writers:

WHOLE WHEAT PASTA

Bionatura Organic, Barilla Whole Grain Penne, Ronzoni Healthy Harvest, Trader Joe's Organic, DeBoles Organic, Rao's Homemade.

WHOLE WHEAT BREADs

Sliced breads

Arnold Whole Grain Double Protein came out the winner in several taste tests (The Arnold brand goes by Oroweat in the West, Brownberry in the Midwest).

Freihofer's Country Stone Ground 100% Whole Wheat

Nature's Harvest Stone Ground 100% Whole Wheat
Eureka! Seeds the Day, Organic

Whole Foods Market Organic 100% Whole Wheat
Nature's Own: Premium Specialty 12 Grain or Double Fiber Wheat
Pepperidge Farm: Farmhouse Soft 100% Whole Wheat and Whole Grain 15 Grain
Vermont Bread Company Yoga Bread
Rise Organic Bakery 100% Whole Wheat
Martin's 100% Whole Wheat Potato Bread
Rubschlager 100% Whole Grain Pumpernickel Bread

Sprouted breads

Ezekiel 4:9 Low Sodium Sprouted Whole Grain Bread and Sesame Sprouted Whole Grain Bread
Shiloh Farms Sprouted 7 Grain Bread, Organic
Alvarado Street Bakery Sprouted Soy Crunch Bread

Buns

Ozery Bakery Onebun

SNACKS

The snacks below are either made with whole grains or contain other ingredients, like nuts and berries, favored by the antidepressant diet. Snacks aren't necessarily healthy. Their sugar and salt content impair concentration and also make them slightly addictive. On the other hand, we all do it and these products are a lot healthier than the alternatives.

Whole Wheat Crackers

Mary's Gone Crackers
Ak-Mak Sesame Cracker
Carr's Whole Wheat Crackers
365 Everyday Value (Whole Foods) Woven Wheats Baked Crackers
Kashi Heart to Heart Whole Grain Crackers
Nabisco Triscuit 100% Whole Wheat
100 Whole Wheat Crispbreads (e.g. Wasa or Finn Crisp Original Rye)
Ritz toasted chips 100% whole grain

Bars

Kind Plus Cranberry Almond Bar

Kind Plus Peanut Butter Dark Chocolate Bar
Raw Revolution Chunky Peanut Butter Chocolate Bar
Raw Revolution Cranberry Almond & Coconut healthy
Abound Pomegranate & Cranberry Bar
Larabar Uber Dark Chocolate Peanut Bar
Pure Organic Wild Blueberry Bar
Balance Bare Mixed Berry Nut

Chips and Pretzels

SunChips 100% whole wheat chips
Way Better Snacks Tortilla Chips
Snyder's Whole Grain Tortilla Chips
Snyder's Whole Wheat Pretzel Sticks
Beigel Beigel 100 % Wheat Pretzels
Unique Sprouted 100% Whole Grain Pretzel Splits

Chips made from beans:

Famous Falafel Chips
Beanitos chips (made from beans)
Kashi Hummus Crisps
The Mediterranean Snack Food Baked Lentil Chips
Dry roasted edamame

Popcorn is a whole wheat. Pop your own for better health. Directions: place 3 tablespoons olive oil in a heavy bottom pot with a lid on. Turn the heat to high and place 3 popcorn kernels in it. When those 3 test kernels pop, add 1/3 cup of popcorn kernels and turn the heat off. Let it rest without heat for 30 seconds, then turn the heat to high again. Using oven mitts, shake the pot every 5-10 seconds and lift the top a little to let steam out (otherwise the popcorn can be soggy). When the popping goes down (if there's a few seconds between each pop) remove the lid, add light salt and/or herbs/spices, and enjoy. Tip: use "Popcorn salt"; it sticks better.

Read more at:

moodtreatmentcenter.com/minddiet.pdf

—Chris Aiken, M.D., updated 6/6/2018