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Eating well

A whole lot of benefit to eating whole grains

By Pat Baird
FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

Cereals and grains are the food group at the base of the Food Guide Pyramid. This indicates they are the foods we should be eating the most of each day. Breads, rolls, tortillas, breakfast cereals, rice, and pasta are a few of the foods from which to choose. There's another important element to consider, however, which is that whole-grain items are the best selections.

Whole grains are special because that means all healthful parts of the grain are used: the fiber-rich bran, the endosperm and the germ. These components contain antioxidant vitamins and minerals, complex carbohydrates, and phytonutrients (nutrients naturally found in plants) that may help protect the body from some diseases like cancer or coronary heart disease. The evidence is so strong that the Food and Drug Administration now permits a new health claim for packaged foods that reads "Low-fat diets rich in whole-grain foods and other plant foods may reduce the risk of heart disease and certain cancers." To meet this claim a food must contain at least 51 percent whole grains, have at least 2.8 grams of fiber in a 50-gram serving, and be low in total fat, saturated fat and cholesterol.

A new Harvard Medical School study published in the September issue of the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, involving more than 75,000 women, found that eating a

diet rich in whole-grain foods like whole-grain breads, cereals and brown rice may significantly reduce the risk of coronary heart disease.

In March, the American Journal of Public Health concluded that "total mortality was inversely associated with whole grain intake and positively associated with refined grain intake." This study was conducted with more than 700 women in The Iowa Women's Health Study. The death rate from cancer and cardiovascular disease declined significantly in women who had higher intakes of whole grains. These women also tended to have healthier lifestyles and less baseline disease. "Substitution of whole for refined grain may reduce chronic disease risk in the United States," the paper also said.

Despite these — and numerous other — impressive studies, many Americans still are not eating whole grains. Results of a recent survey of 1,000 adults conducted for Pepperidge Farm found 65 percent of the respondents did not eat three servings of whole grains. (That was the amount having the greatest protective benefit in the Harvard study and was also the number of servings recommended by The American Dietetic Association.) Twenty-two percent of those surveyed indicated that they think they already eat enough grains; and 12 percent said they are not aware of whole-food sources. "Understanding the importance of whole grains can help people make better



Whole-grain foods contain elements that might help to protect the body from some health problems, such as cancer and coronary heart disease.

Spinach Melt

Adapted from "Quick & Hearty," Pat Baird (Henry Holt, 1995)

4 servings

INGREDIENTS

1 pound fresh **spinach**, stemmed and rinsed, OR one 10-ounce package frozen and defrosted chopped spinach, squeezed dry
1 tablespoon **olive oil**
1 medium **onion**, thinly sliced
½ teaspoon **salt**
¼ teaspoon freshly ground **black pepper**
½ teaspoon ground **nutmeg**
4 slices whole grain **bread**

DIRECTIONS

1. If using fresh spinach, place it in a 3-quart microwavable casserole without drying it. Cover with lid or vented plastic wrap; microwave on HIGH for 2 minutes. Drain; cool and squeeze dry. Chop coarsely and set aside.
2. In a 2-quart glass baking dish combine oil and onion. Microwave on HIGH for 4 to 6 minutes, or

until onion is very tender, stirring once or twice. Add spinach, salt, pepper and nutmeg; stir thoroughly to combine. Microwave on HIGH for 2 minutes, or until spinach is tender, and mixture is heated through.

3. Place a paper towel on a 12-inch glass or paper plate. Place the bread on top; divide spinach mixture evenly over each slice of bread. Sprinkle cheese over top. Microwave on HIGH for 2 to 3 minutes, or until cheese is melted.

NOTE: Recipes tested in 650-watt oven; adjust timing to suit your oven.

NUTRITION INFORMATION

Per 7-ounce serving:
190 calories; 13g protein; 23g carbs; 4g sugar; 6g total fat; 1g saturated fat; 3g mono-unsaturated fat; 7mg cholesterol; 5g dietary fiber; 596mg sodium; 348mg calcium; 4mg iron

Apple Curry Rice

Adapted from "Quick & Hearty," Pat Baird (Henry Holt, 1995)

6 servings

INGREDIENTS

½ cup **water**
½ cup **raisins**
1 tablespoon **vegetable oil**
½ cup **chopped onion**
2 teaspoons **curry powder**
½ teaspoon freshly ground **black pepper**
1 **Golden Delicious apple**, cored, peeled and chopped
3 cups cooked **brown rice** (cooked in ¾ cup **apple juice** and 1¾ cups **water**, if desired)
Salt, to taste

DIRECTIONS

1. Pour water into 2-cup glass measure. Microwave on HIGH for 1 minute. Add raisins and let soak

for 5 minutes. Drain and set aside.

2. In 2-quart microwavable casserole, combine oil, onion, curry powder and pepper. Microwave on HIGH for 2 minutes, or until onions are just tender. Stir in apple, tossing well to coat; stir in rice. Re-cover, and cook on HIGH 3 to 5 minutes, or until rice is heated through. Add raisins and salt to taste.

NUTRITION INFORMATION

Per 7-ounce serving:
207 calories; 3g protein; 42g carbs; 17g sugar; 3g total fat; 0g saturated fat; 1g mono-unsaturated fat; 0mg cholesterol; 2g dietary fiber; 95mg sodium; 24mg calcium; 1mg iron

food choices," says consulting nutritionist Robyn Flipse of Ocean, a registered dietitian. Brown rice, oatmeal, whole-wheat flour, wheat berries, bulgur and barley are a few examples of whole-grain foods.

Whole grains are rich sources of vitamins, minerals and fiber. Many grains contain soluble and insoluble types of fiber. This helps to increase fecal bulk and decrease transit time in the gut, which allows less opportunity for cancer-causing agents to invade intestinal tissue. Selenium is also found in whole grains. This mineral functions as a co-factor for an enzyme that protects against oxidative tissue damage and, as such, appears to lower the risk of certain types of cancer.

Vitamin E, which is also found in whole grains, is believed to be a cancer inhibitor. The theory here is that this nutrient may prevent the formation of carcinogens. Lignans, which are hormonally active compounds in

grains, may protect against hormonally mediated diseases like cancers of the breast and prostate. Whole grains also contain compounds like protease inhibitors, phytic acid, phenolics, and saponins — also known as antinutrients — which may act as cancer inhibitors by preventing the formation of carcinogens and by blocking the interaction of carcinogens within the cell.

To make sure what you're buying is a whole-grain food, check the ingredient list on the product label. The first ingredient on the list should be a whole grain such as "whole grain oats," "whole grain wheat," or simply "whole wheat." Finally, remember that six to 11 servings a day is the recommendation of the Food Guide Pyramid, the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and a number of health professional organizations.

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