



Why Whole Grains Should Be Part of Your Diet

By Janice Stanger, PhD
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Whole grains have an image problem. Media headlines and fitness magazines warn that eating grains can make you fat and sick. When you look at the facts, however, *whole* grains are health-promoting.

Whole Grains, Refined Grains, and Pseudo-Grains

The choice becomes clearer once you understand the biology of plants.

- **Whole grains** are the seeds of certain grasses that store their energy mostly as complex carbohydrates. Wheat, corn, rice, barley, oats, millet, and rye are the most common examples. Whole grain foods contain all parts of the seed: the outer protective skin (bran), the tiny baby plant (the germ), and food to nourish the baby plant until it can produce its own (endosperm).
- **Refined grain foods**, on the other hand, are generally made only from the endosperm. Most of the healthy bran, germ, and nutrients have been stripped away.

- **Pseudo-grains** include quinoa, buckwheat, and amaranth. These seeds are similar nutritionally to traditional whole grains, but they are produced by plants that are not grasses. While this difference is important to botanists, it's less important if you're simply trying to decide what to cook for dinner. You can use whole grains and pseudo-grains interchangeably.

Many published, peer-reviewed studies on people who eat more whole grains attribute a spectrum of health benefits to these foods. Here are three primary ones:

1. Whole Grains Decrease Your Risk of Obesity

A common myth is that foods high in carbohydrates cause obesity. Yet peer-reviewed research finds quite the opposite among people who consume higher proportions of their carbohydrates in the form of *whole* grains. Here are some representative findings:

- An eight-year study of American men found that those who ate more whole grains gained less weight. In fact, each additional 1.4 ounces of whole grains eaten per day staved off a pound of weight gain.
- Similarly, a twelve-year study of women in the U.S. discovered that those who consumed more whole grains consistently weighed less than other women.
- An analysis of fifteen research trials with data from 119,829 participants concluded that a higher intake of whole grains was linked to lower BMI and waist size.

2. Whole Grains Reduce Your Risk of Chronic Illness

People who consume whole grains have less chance of developing the chronic degenerative illnesses that pervade the modern world. In fact, eating more whole grains is linked to lower levels of a common

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inflammatory marker associated with chronic disease. Consider a few of the many consistent results:

- While diabetes is popularly thought to be associated with high carbohydrate foods, an analysis of 16 studies found that 3 servings of whole grains per day reduced the risk of developing diabetes by 32%.
- Another analysis of 66 studies found a similar number: a 26% decrease in the risk of developing diabetes, as well as a 21% lower risk of cardiovascular disease with higher whole-grain consumption. Specific risk markers improved by these foods included fasting glucose, insulin, cholesterol, and blood pressure.
- A Scandinavian study of 108,000 participants discovered that eating more whole-grain products reduced the risk of developing colorectal cancer, with whole wheat having the strongest benefit.

3. Whole Grains Help You Live Longer

In 2015, researchers published an analysis of two large studies of participants followed for a period of about 25 years. They reported that each additional one-ounce daily serving of whole grains reduced the risk of death over the study period by 5%, and the risk of death from cardiovascular disease by 9%. The beneficial effect was seen from the combined effects of many foods, including whole wheat and whole-wheat flour, oats, corn and popcorn, rye, brown rice, and whole-grain breakfast cereals.

Scientists cite a number of reasons that whole grains could have such favorable effects. Their high fiber makes food more satisfying, and whole grains promote beneficial gut microbes, which produce protective short-chain fatty acids. These foods are dense with vitamins, minerals, amino acids, antioxidants, and phytochemicals. Whole grains may also displace less-healthy foods that would otherwise be eaten. The big picture, as it is better understood, is likely to involve numerous, interrelated reasons why whole grains promote health.

Don't let unsupported claims by those who ignore the consistent science deprive you of the pleasure and benefits of whole grains. These foods are inexpensive, filling, nutritious, and healthful. Enjoy them throughout your day.

Read More:

- [The Smoke and Mirrors Behind Wheat Belly and Grain Brain](#)
- [The Only Three Food Groups You Need to Remember](#)

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