

Fibre, Wholegrain Cereals and Cancer Risk



This information sheet is about fibre, wholegrain cereals and how it influences your cancer risk. It is based on research evidence and has been written for the general public.

Key Messages

Eating a healthy diet can reduce the risk of a number of diseases including some cancers.

Getting enough fibre each day is an important part of eating well. Eating wholegrain foods is a good way of making sure you get enough fibre.

Wholegrain foods can contribute to a healthy digestive system, help with weight control and reduce the risk of getting diabetes and heart disease. It is also likely to help reduce the risk of some cancers, especially bowel cancer.

Studies have shown that people who eat wholegrain foods regularly are less likely to develop bowel cancer.

What is fibre?

Fibre is a complex mix of substances and is found only in plant foods – breads and cereals, especially wholegrain varieties, fruits and vegetables, legumes, nuts and seeds.

Wholegrain foods also have natural substances such as antioxidants and phytochemicals that are an important way of getting B vitamins. Wholegrain foods help prevent constipation and helps the growth of good bacteria in the bowel. They also make you feel fuller for longer making weight control easier.

While white bread and other refined cereals have some fibre and some of the other substances they have a lot less than wholegrain varieties. Refined cereals have the outer layers, the bran and germ, which are rich in fibre and nutrients removed so those important nutrients are lost.

Wholegrain foods include:

- Wholemeal or multigrain bread, muffins, pita bread, bagels
- Oats – porridge, muesli
- Wholegrain or whole-wheat breakfast cereals (for example branflakes and weetbix)
- Wholemeal or mixed grain crackers and crispbread
- Brown rice
- Wholemeal pasta
- Cracked wheat (bulgur)
- Foods made with corn, barley, rye, and millet.

How much should I eat?

Adults should eat six to eight servings of bread and cereals each day. Try to make at least half of these wholegrain – the more if you can, the better. Breads and cereals are carbohydrate foods and an important way of getting energy as well as fibre.

What is a serving?

1 cup of wholegrain cereal flakes

½ cup porridge or muesli

1 cup of cooked brown rice or wholemeal pasta

1 weetbix

1 slice of wholemeal, wholegrain or multigrain bread

1 wholemeal roll

3 to 4 wholegrain crackers/crispbread.

Ways to increase wholegrain foods

Breakfast

- Have wholegrain, wholemeal or multigrain toast or English muffins instead of white toast or muffins.
- Choose a bran or whole wheat cereal, muesli or porridge.

Lunch

- Choose wholemeal, whole wheat or multigrain bread, rolls, pita bread or bagels for toast or sandwiches. Add salad vegetables for extra fibre.
- Enjoy corn on the cob or canned corn on wholemeal/grain toast or in sandwiches.
- Include brown rice, wholemeal pasta or tabouli (bulgur wheat) in salads or soups.

Dinner

- Use brown rice instead of white for curries, with casseroles or in salads.
- Try wholemeal pasta and lasagne.
- If you have bread make it wholemeal or mixed grain.
- Have corn as a vegetable.
- If you are using breadcrumbs in a recipe (for example meatballs) use wholemeal/wholegrain bread. Oats can also be used to make meatloaf.
- Thicken sauces, gravies and casseroles with wholemeal flour.
- Use oats and/or wholemeal flour in baked puddings. Try toasted muesli as a crunchy topping on fruit, yoghurt or custard.

Snacks

- Have wholegrain crackers or crisp bread that is low in fat and salt (check the label).
- Have a muesli bar but check the label and look for low levels of fat and sugar.
- Try popcorn (but not with salt or butter).

- Add some muesli to low fat yoghurt.
- Use wholemeal flour or add bran, wheat germ or oats in baking.

Changing to wholegrain

If you are not used to wholegrain cereals and breads try mixing half wholegrain and half white flour/cereals and slowly increase the amount of wholegrain you add to the recipe as you get used to it.

If you are not sure which foods are high in fibre compare the labels of different foods and brands and choose the one with the most fibre.

What about white bread?

While white bread contains less fibre and less of the other healthy substances found with fibre, all bread is still a good source of carbohydrate, energy, B vitamins and protein. Look for high fibre white bread.

What about fibre supplements?

Wholegrain foods contain a complex mix of nutrients and substances which all work together. Not all of these are in fibre supplements. It is better to get fibre from food.

If you are constipated it is better to eat more fruit, vegetables and grain-based foods, drink more fluids and get some daily physical activity than it is to rely on supplements.

Other sources of fibre

Eating wholegrain foods is important but you will also get fibre from fruit and vegetables.