



WHOLE GRAINS AND HEART HEALTH: JUST THE FACTS

Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States. Genetics play a role in determining one's heart disease risk, and there's little you can do about that. However, you have much more control over certain lifestyle factors, such as following a heart healthy diet, being physically active, and not smoking.

According to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, a healthy eating pattern is more greatly associated with disease risk than any individual food or nutrient.¹ Patterns most associated with heart health are the Healthy US Style Eating Pattern, which itself is modeled after the Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) Diet. The Mediterranean style of eating is also considered heart-healthy. All three patterns emphasize fruits, vegetables and whole grains, as well as seafood, nuts and legumes.



Why Whole Grains

Whole grains are a great source of fiber, which helps lower blood cholesterol levels. That's why old-fashioned oats (a whole grain) and other foods rich in beta-glucan, the fiber associated with pulling cholesterol out of the bloodstream, can carry a heart-health claim on the front of food packages.

The fiber in whole grains also contributes to satiety, or a feeling of fullness, which helps prevent overeating. Abdominal adiposity, or carrying excess weight around your midsection, is a risk factor for heart disease. Research has shown that people who eat more whole grains tend to have lower body weight and smaller waist circumference compared to those who eat fewer whole grain foods.²

What the Science Says

There is an abundance of research suggesting that diets high in whole grains is associated with heart health. Among the more recent and prominent findings:

- A Harvard study found that women who ate two to three servings of whole grain foods per day (in line with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans) were 30% less likely to have a heart attack or die from heart disease compared to women who ate less than one serving of whole grains per week.³
- People who ate 2.5 or more servings of whole grains per day were 21% less likely to suffer from cardiovascular disease, compared to those who ate fewer than two whole grain servings per week.⁴

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Label Reading

Grain foods that contain a minimum amount of soluble fiber (0.6 grams/serving without fortification) and meet the qualifications as a low saturated fat, low fat and low cholesterol food may carry a health claim on the front of the package, such as: "Diets rich in whole grain foods and other plant foods, and low in saturated fat and cholesterol, may help reduce the risk of heart disease."⁵ Other labels to look for on food packages include:

- The American Heart Association's Heart-Check mark.
- The Whole Grain Council stamp. Look for stamps that indicate at least 50% of the grains in the product come from whole grain sources. A stamp with 100% means that all grains in the product are whole grains.



References

- ¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Agriculture. *2015–2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. 8th Edition. December 2015. Available at <http://health.gov/dietaryguidelines/2015/guidelines/>.
- ² Harland JI and Garton LE. Whole-grain intake as a marker of healthy body weight and adiposity. *Public Health Nutr.* 2008;11(6):554-563.
- ³ Zong G, Gao A, Hu FB, Sun Q. Whole grain intake and mortality from all causes, cardiovascular disease, and cancer: a meta-analysis of prospective cohort studies. *Circulation.* 2016;133:2370-80.
- ⁴ Liu S, Stampfer MJ, Hu FB, et al. Whole-grain consumption and risk of coronary heart disease: results from the Nurses' Health Study. *Am J Clin Nutr.* 1999;70:412-9.
- ⁵ 21 CFR 101.77 [Health claims: fruits, vegetables, and grain products that contain fiber, particularly soluble fiber, and risk of coronary heart disease](#)

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