

Breakfast Cereals

As loved as they are, they come with many misleading health claims and ingredients not associated with good health, says **Caroline Hopkins Legaspi**

Counterintuitive as it may sound, the first step to choosing a healthy cereal is to ignore the front of the box, said Dr Preeti Kishore, an endocrinologist at NYC Health + Hospitals in the Bronx in New York City, US.

Some cereals have front-facing claims that seem to imply healthfulness, such as that they are good for your heart or immune system, can lower cholesterol or are made with real fruit.

But their nutrition labels may tell a different story. Some, for instance, have as much (if not more) added sugars and calories as some desserts. And many are made with refined grains, which are quickly digested and can spike your blood sugar, leaving you hungry afterwards, said Maddison Saalinger, a dietitian at the University of Miami, US. Over time, diets high in refined grains can increase the risk for type 2 diabetes, obesity and other chronic diseases.

Even some cereals with claims such as "immunity support" don't have any supporting evidence, Dr Kishore said.

Prioritise whole grains

Whole grains are an essential part of a healthy diet. They are loaded with nutrients such as B vitamins, iron, magnesium and antioxidants, as well as heart and gut-healthy fibre.

Grains are considered "whole" when they contain all three parts of the kernel: the endosperm (rich in carbohydrates), the germ (containing nutrients such as B vitamins, folate and healthy fats) and the bran (full of fibre).

Refined grains, on the other hand, have been stripped down to just one of their parts, Saalinger said, which removes the grain's full range of health benefits. And refined grains are less filling and satiating than whole grains.

Look for phrases such as whole grain wheat, whole grain oats, whole grain corn and whole grain brown rice on the ingredients list. And prioritise cereals that have those ingredients listed first, which signals that they are present in greater amounts, said Adern Yu, a dietitian at the

City of Hope Cancer Center in Duarte, California, US. If you see ingredients such as wheat flour or corn flour, that indicates the presence of refined grains.

Find your fibre sweet spot

Most adults don't get the recommended 21 to 38 grams or more of fibre per day.

Many higher fibre cereals — such as the Fiber One Original Bran Breakfast Cereal (18 grams per serving) or Nature's Path Smart Bran (17 grams per serving) — can help you meet that goal. But if you're not used to consuming that much fibre at once, it can cause unpleasant side effects such as bloating or

gas, Saalinger cautioned.

To ease into a higher fibre cereal, choose a variety with at least 5 grams of fibre per serving, Dr Kishore said. From there, you can work your way up.

Watch for hidden sugar

Federal health experts recommend that most people should

consume fewer than 50 grams of added sugars each day. The American Heart Association sets a stricter limit of no more than about 25 grams of sugar per day for women and 36 grams per day for men.

Some breakfast cereals, even ones marketed as "healthier", can contribute substantially toward that limit. A serving of Honey Nut Cheerios, for instance, has 12 grams of sugar; Cracklin' Oat Bran has 15 grams.

To help avoid consuming too much sugar in one day, Saalinger suggested choosing cereals with less than 8 grams of added sugars per serving.

And watch out for hidden sources of sugar on the ingredients list, Dr Kishore said. High-fructose corn syrup, fruit-juice concentrate, honey and agave nectar are all just other names for added sugar.

Don't get distracted by 'extras'

Many breakfast cereals are fortified with added nutrients, such as vitamins and minerals or protein, for example. If you are deficient in certain nutrients, these fortified cereals might be beneficial, Dr Kishore said.

But if you follow a balanced diet, you're most likely already receiving enough of these nutrients, she said. And these added vitamins and minerals won't cancel out other, less-healthy aspects of a cereal.

Certain added nutrients such as protein, iron, zinc and B vitamins can taste chalky, bitter or metallic, she said, so manufacturers sometimes add more sugar to balance them out.

Here's the bottom line

Although it's indeed possible to find a healthy cereal, experts cautioned that it shouldn't be your only breakfast option. Incorporating other foods — such as eggs or chia seed pudding — into your morning meals can help you get a healthy balance of nutrients. With a little meal prep, these alternatives can be just as quick and convenient as cereal, Dr Kishore said.



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