

Whole Wheat is Better, Isn't It?



A school teacher recently asked me about the nutritional values of whole wheat foods and foods made with white flour. Whole wheat is better, isn't it? Doesn't it have more good stuff in it than white flour?

The answer is yes and no.

Whole wheat flour is made with the whole kernel of wheat that includes the bran, endosperm and germ. The outer shell of the wheat kernel is the bran. The bran contains fiber, B vitamins and 50 to 80 percent of the grain's minerals and phytochemicals (plant chemicals that promote health). The endosperm is the big part of the grain and it contains complex carbohydrates, protein and smaller amounts of B vitamins. Wheat germ contains B vitamins, vitamin E, trace minerals, unsaturated fats, phytochemicals and antioxidants that also promote health. Products made with whole wheat are full of naturally occurring fiber, vitamins, minerals, protein, phytochemicals and antioxidants.

White or unbleached flour is made by first removing the bran and germ before milling. Because the nutrient dense germ and bran have been removed white flours are enriched with iron and B vitamins that replace some of the nutrients that have been removed in milling. Since January 1, 1998 white flours have been enriched with folic acid that results in a slice of white bread containing nearly six times more folic acid than before. Products made with white enriched flours will contain more folic acid than whole wheat products. White and unbleached flours do not have any fiber.

Back to the question about which is better, whole wheat or white grain products.? Whole wheat products will contain more fiber, protein, minerals, and vitamins, except for folic acid, phytochemicals and antioxidants than refined or white flour products.

White flour is made by using a bleaching agent to make the naturally very pale yellow refined flour appear white. There is a debate between bakers and pastry chefs about which flour bakes the best, bleached or unbleached.

Enriching refined flour does not replace all of the vitamins, minerals, phytochemicals and antioxidants or any of the fiber that have been removed. Emerging research is beginning to make a strong case in favor of phytochemicals and antioxidants and the roles they play in maintaining cellular health and preventing cancer. According to the Food and Drug Administration, "Diets rich in whole grain foods and other plant foods, and low in total fat, saturated fat and cholesterol, may reduce the risk of heart disease and certain cancers." The National Center of Nutrition and Dietetics of the American Dietetic Association and the U.S. Dietary Guidelines recommend that Americans eat at least three servings of whole grains foods daily. For a grain product to qualify as a whole grain the first ingredient must be 100 percent whole wheat or another whole grain like oats; just because the product is brown doesn't mean it is a whole grain product. One serving of whole grain food is equal to: ½ cup cooked or 1 ounce ready to eat cereal, 1 slice whole grain

bread, 5-7 small whole grain crackers, ½ cup whole grain pasta or brown rice and 2 cups popcorn.

For many years, centuries in fact, breads, cakes and pastries made with white flour were a sign of wealth. Only the very richest families could afford refined white flour – peasants ate dark breads. After the industrial revolution refined flours became more economical to produce and became widely available. I am often asked questions about what flour should be used in baking. This is where I rely on a very unscientific process to make the flour decision in my kitchen. When I use a refined flour, I use unbleached flour because that is what my grandmother, who taught me to bake, used. Most of the time I bake with a mixture of one half whole wheat flour and one half unbleached flour in cake and cookie recipes. For making breads I often use 100 percent whole wheat flour because I like the rich nutty flavor and chewy texture of whole wheat breads.



These links can provide more information about whole wheat foods - great links to good websites

www.wheatfoods.org

www.oznet.ksu.edu/news/sty/2005/cancer_preventing032105.htm

www.extension.umn.edu/extensionnews/2005/foodchoices.htm

www.wawheat.com/links.asp -

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