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## Spooning Up a Healthy Bowl of Cereal

By Debbie DeAngelo  
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Cereal – it’s not just for breakfast. Ready-to-eat cereal makes for a quick, convenient snack or meal any time of the day. Apparently, it’s an all-time favorite because approximately 70% of U.S. households eat it.

As you’re staring down at the Wheaties floating in your bowl, have you ever wondered how it’s made? Cold cereal begins by processing the grain into flour and cooking it. The flour is then mixed with other ingredients, such as cocoa and sugar. It may then be shaped by a high-temperature machine before being dried. Some go on to be flaked, shredded, puffed, or coated in frosting or more sugar. The steps in this method are pivotal in determining how healthy your cereal is.

## What's in the Box?

Almost all breakfast cereals are promoted as being healthy in some way, when many of them aren't even close. That cheerful box is typically full of refined grains, sugars, and dyes. Choose wisely and cereal can be nutritious. Otherwise, it's more like a sweet indulgence. Here are five traits to consider when kicking off the day with a bowl of comfort food.

**Serving size.** This is the quantity of cereal that contains the listed nutrient values like calories, fiber, sugar, and vitamins. There isn't an established standard serving size, so the range varies greatly. It may be as little as 1/2 cup or as much as 1-1/3 cup ... and let's face it, who eats that puny amount? To get a more accurate idea of how much you're eating, pour your normal amount into a bowl and then measure. It makes a significant difference when calculating the nutritional data. When comparing several types of cereal, be sure to base it on the same amount.

**Fiber.** Unless it's a keto or paleo-friendly cereal, all are rich sources of carbohydrates. That's why it's important to eat one made from whole grains, rather than refined grains. Not only is it more filling due to the rich fiber content but it is a more complete source of vitamins and minerals. Also, whole grains result in a gradual increase in blood sugar level. Refined grains leave you feeling hungry sooner due to the blood sugar spike. Look for cereals with at least three grams of fiber per serving. Remember, the first ingredient listed should be the "whole" grain. For example, whole grain wheat, whole grain rice or whole grain oats.

**Sugar.** Those of us of a certain age can recall digging into a bowl of Fruit Loops with a total lack of regard for sugar. Not any longer. Added sugar grams per serving are listed beneath the carbohydrates in the nutrition analysis. It's recorded in grams, which can be difficult to visualize and interpret. If you convert it to teaspoons of sugar by dividing the total number of sugar grams by four, it will be easier to decide how much sugar is acceptable to consume in your breakfast cereal.

The American Heart Association established a daily added sugar limit of nine teaspoons for men and six teaspoons for women. This awareness may mean making a slight shift to a cereal that is a better choice. Case in point, 1-1/2 cups of plain Cheerios contain one gram (1/4 teaspoon) of added sugar while only one cup of Oat Crunch Cinnamon Cheerios contains 15 grams (3-3/4 teaspoons) of sugar.

Further, cereal with dried fruit is higher in sugar than you would expect. You may assume that dried fruit is a healthy addition but you're better off adding your own fresh or dried fruit because the manufacturer often coats the dried

fruit in even more sugar. Another option to retain some sweetness in your bowl without overdoing it is to mix a less sugary brand with the sugar-laden type you usually eat. As time goes on, you may find that you can increase the ratio of unsweetened to sweetened cereal.

**Protein.** Protein helps you feel full. Whole grains naturally contain protein. Grain-free cereals rely on the addition of processed isolated proteins. If you use cow's milk or soy milk, the amount of protein substantially increases.

**Order of ingredients.** The order in which ingredients are listed is from most to least plentiful. As with any food, the fewer ingredients, the better. A litany of ingredients is likely to include several additives, preservatives, and dyes.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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