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Does Your Bread Rise to the Occasion?

By Debbie DeAngelo
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Bread is a quintessential meal staple. From toast to sandwiches to mopping up sauce, it seems to be a fundamental part of culinary life worldwide. As a holistic health coach, I don't believe that bread is a villain. If you choose a nutritious loaf, eat it in moderation, and balance it with vegetables, protein and fat, it won't trigger insulin spikes in most individuals. Bread can be a nourishing, filling and satisfying part of a meal. It all starts with the loaf you reach for in the grocery store.

The Staff of Life

It's not difficult to choose a healthy loaf of bread. You just need to know what to look for. Here's how to evaluate the nutritional profile and compare brands, so you can make the best choice.

Label claims. First and foremost, don't blindly believe the splashy claims plastered all over the packaging. They're designed to capture your attention and mislead you into believing their product is delicious, healthy and good for you. Approach the package declarations with a hefty dose of skepticism and look for proof in the nutritional analysis and ingredient list.

Whole grains. When you read words such as "multi-grain," "12 grain," or "stoneground," you could be convinced that the product is wholesome. Don't be fooled. These terms are meaningless. Flip over the loaf and zero in on the ingredient list. The first grain or flour listed should be preceded by the word "whole." For example, whole wheat instead of wheat or enriched wheat. If it doesn't indicate that whole grain flour was used, then it's a refined flour. Refined flours start out as a whole grain but are then stripped of two of the three hearty layers of the grain, rendering it much lower in fiber and vitamins. It's then "enriched," meaning that the manufacturer adds back a few of the vitamins that were originally removed. Ultimately, you're consuming white bread – no matter what color the bread is.

Fiber. What's the origin of the fiber in bread? You guessed it ... the whole grain. Remember, a product made with whole grain flour contains all three hearty layers of the grain plant. This is partially responsible for the satiety or "stick to your ribs" effect. Look for at least three grams of fiber per slice.

Protein. Surprised that bread should contain protein? It's yet another benefit of whole grains. This protein, along with fiber, keeps you full longer and stabilizes erratic blood-sugar levels that can occur with refined carbohydrates. Try for a product with a minimum of three grams of protein per slice (five would be ideal).

Sugar, Sodium, and More. Honey, molasses, and cane sugar are just a few of the sweeteners added to many breads. While no added sugar is best, it can be difficult to find. Strive to keep the sugar under five grams per slice.

Although we don't typically think of bread as salty, it can contain more sodium than you think. Take a bite out of low sodium bread and you'll soon realize how salty your usual doughy friend has become. Keep it below 150 milligrams of sodium per slice.

And last but not least – what else is in your loaf? If the ingredient list contains a litany of substances that you don't recognize or can't pronounce, you might want to think twice. The shorter the ingredient list, the better.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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