

The Whole Foods Diet

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The more we learn about nutrition, the more it seems we should eat the way people did a hundred years ago. Recent research appears to be pointing us in the direction of eating mostly "whole foods" – that is, foods that are as close to their natural form as possible.

This could mean eating:

- Whole grains instead of refined grains whenever possible.
- Fruits, vegetables, and beans instead of supplements to provide the fiber and vitamins they contain.
- A skinless chicken breast cooked with healthful ingredients instead of chicken nuggets processed with added fats, flavorings, and preservatives.
- A baked potato with chopped green onions and sour cream instead of a bag of sour cream and onion potato chips.
- Fresh berries with breakfast instead of raspberry toaster pastries or breakfast bars.
- A blueberry smoothie made with blueberries, whole yogurt, and a frozen banana instead of a blue-colored slushy or icee.

Many health experts believe that eating more whole foods is our best bet for improving health and preventing disease. Whole foods – like vegetables, fruits, whole grains, nuts, and legumes -- retain their fiber as well as the whole portfolio of beneficial phytochemicals and nutrients that are often removed in processed foods.

The idea of whole foods is catching on the popular imagination as well. Consider the now ubiquitous Whole Foods Market grocery chain, which started in 1980 as one store in Austin, Texas. Its mission was simple: "to provide a more natural alternative to what the food supply was typically offering at the time." Whole Foods is now the world's leading retailer of natural and organic foods, with 184 stores in North America and the United Kingdom. Their 2005 revenue was \$4.7 billion, and they have 78 new stores in the development pipeline between now and 2009.

6 Reasons to Eat Whole Foods

1. **Phytochemicals.** In the past 10 years, scientists have identified hundreds of biologically active plant-food components called phytochemicals (or phytonutrients). They include the powerful antioxidant lycopene, a red-colored carotenoid found mainly in tomatoes; anthocyanins, a powerful antioxidant that gives deep blue color to berries; and pterostilbene, which appears to turn on a "switch" in cells that breaks down fat and cholesterol, and is found in blueberries and the Gamay and Pinot Noir varieties of grapes.

The only way to make sure you're getting the phytochemicals we know about, as well as the ones we haven't yet discovered or named, is to eat plant foods in their whole, unprocessed form (or ground, if they're grains or seeds).

2. **Nutrient shortages.** According to national survey results published by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, almost a third of us get too little vitamin C; almost half get too little vitamin A; more than half get too little magnesium; and some 92% to 97% get too little fiber and potassium. Yet, according to the American Institute for Cancer Research (AICR), these particular nutrients help lower the risk of our major health problems: cancer, heart disease, high blood pressure, and diabetes.

What's the easiest way to correct this nutrient shortage? Two words: whole foods. "Almost all of the shortfalls identified by this survey can be corrected by eating a balanced, mostly plant-based diet," says AICR nutrition advisor Karen Collins, RD.

3. **Good fats.** When you eat a diet made up mostly of whole foods, it's easier to decrease the bad-for-you fats (trans fats and saturated fats) often added to processed foods and fast food. At the same time, it's easier to emphasize the "good" fats (omega-3s from fish and plants, and monounsaturated fat from plant sources).

4. **Fiber.** Most whole plant foods are rich in fiber; many processed foods, junk foods, and fast foods are not. Fiber helps your health in all sorts of ways; keeps the GI tract moving, helps you feel full faster, and it helps fight heart disease and diabetes.

"Foods are a better way to get fiber than supplements. You get the whole package," says Martin O. Weickert, MD, of the German Institute of Human Nutrition. That's because most plant foods have both types of fiber (soluble and insoluble).

Eating fiber-rich foods is linked to control of blood sugar, blood lipids (fats), and weight in adults, according to researchers from the Georgia Prevention Institute who recently did a study on whole-grain foods and abdominal fat in teenagers.

5. **Fewer 'extras.'** Whole foods are as nature made them, without added fat, sugar, or sodium. Eating more whole foods will help you cut down on calories from the added fats and sugars we get from processed and fast foods.

6. **Whole grains.** You might think the benefits of whole grains have mostly to do with fiber, but there's so much more than that. "Whole grains are rich in a myriad of vitamins, minerals and phytochemical compounds that, alone or in combination, are likely to have significant health benefits that are beyond that from dietary fiber," notes Simin Liu, MD, ScD, a researcher and professor of epidemiology at the University of California-Los Angeles.

Want to lower your risk of developing type 2 diabetes, and improve your cholesterol levels? Then switch to whole grains. Whole-grain foods have recently been linked to lower levels of blood glucose and insulin after meals. And according to Liu, research consistently supports the premise that eating more whole-grain foods can lower the risk of type 2 diabetes.

Eating more whole grains may also lead to less visceral adipose tissue – a type of fat that's deposited between the organs and the abdominal muscles, and is thought to be particularly

unhealthy. A Georgia Prevention Institute study that measured the abdominal fat and food intake of 460 teenagers concluded that whole-grain foods may help protect against the accumulation of this type of fat in some teens.

6 Ways to Add Whole Foods to Your Diet

So just how do you go about getting more whole foods in your diet? Here are six simple steps to take:

- Choose products with 100% whole grains whenever possible.
- Replace half the white flour called for in your baking recipes with whole-wheat flour. Also, use half the amount of sweetener when you can.
- Eat lots of fresh vegetables and fruits. Try to include them in almost every meal and snack.
- Include beans in your meals and snacks more often. They are a great source of plant protein, fiber, phytochemicals, and other nutrients.
- Eat fewer convenience and processed foods. They're often loaded with added fat, sugar, salt, and additives.
- Don't forget your beverages. Go for non-sugary options such as water, mineral water, green tea (iced or hot), fresh fruit juice, and skim or soy milk.

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