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Understanding Whole Grains

By now, we've all heard the message that whole grains are good for us. We've seen the words "whole grain" splashed on everything from breads and breakfast cereals to cookies and snack crackers. With the release of the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which recommends consuming at least three servings a day of whole grains, we know that whole grains are important to our health: but why? What is a whole grain and what do they do for the body? How can you be sure that the foods you and your family are eating contain whole grains? The information below can help you understand how to spot true whole grain products and begin incorporating them into your family's diet.

In the past, it was thought that whole grains only provided the body with fiber. We now know that whole grains are also great sources of vitamins and minerals and contain high levels of antioxidants. Current research shows that eating more whole grains may even help reduce the risk for heart disease, cancer, and diabetes. With all of the latest research, it is no surprise that food manufacturers have jumped on the whole grain bandwagon. Products are now being reformulated to include whole grains. However, just because the package claims it contains whole grains, does not mean that is a true "whole grain" food. So, how do we know if the products we're buying meet the whole grain recommendation?

First, it is important to note that all grains start out as whole grains. After milling, if all three parts of the original grain – the bran, germ, and endosperm - are still there in their original proportions, it remains a whole grain. When any of the three is removed, that grain becomes refined. Refined grains are often made into flour and used in such products as white bread. Oatmeal, brown rice, barley, and 100% whole wheat products are just a few examples of true whole grains. Because most products are made with a combination of ingredients, it can be hard to determine if it is truly whole grain. To identify a whole grain food, use the Nutrition Facts Food Label that is found on most foods. If the first ingredient listed is a whole grain, such as "whole oats", then that product qualifies. Breads, rolls, and other products that are "whole white wheat" also meet the whole grain standard because the main ingredient is whole wheat.

Here at School Food Service, we are striving to make whole grains a staple of our daily student menus. All of the grains that we offer in our local schools, including breads, rolls, bagels and pizza crusts, are now at least fifty percent whole grain. We have gone to great lengths to encourage the acceptance of these products and are always on the lookout for new items that meet our high standards. By instilling these habits in our students now, we can look forward to a new generation of healthy children in the years to come.

For more information on whole grains, visit the American Dietetic Association website at www.eatright.org.

