Refined Grains No More:

*How to Change Your Dietary Tires and Avoid the Potholes*

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You have just left work after a productive yet exhausting day and are heading home, where you’ll prepare a nice spaghetti dinner for your spouse and children. Unfortunately, you get a flat tire 10 minutes away from home, but luckily, you’re able to put on the spare donut tire yourself. Does the donut tire get you home? Well, yes. Does it work as well as an actual tire and should it replace the actual tire forever? Of course not!

So what’s the point of this story? A spare donut tire versus a real tire is a great analogy for refined grains versus whole grains. While you should spend most of your time driving around on real tires, you can get away with a donut spare tire every now and then. As donut tires are functional, refined grains are edible. But whole grains, like whole tires, have many more benefits than refined “spare tires” and will keep your body in better shape if you eat them more.

**What’s in a grain?**

Think about a tire. On the outside, it may just look like a thick hunk of rubber, but underneath the outer covering, there are several other layers that play important roles. The same is true for a seed. A whole grain is a kernel or seed with all of its layers – the bran, the germ, and the endosperm – intact. The bran, or outer-most protective layer, contains significant amounts of fiber as well as protein, iron, and B vitamins. The middle layer, the endosperm, contains mostly carbohydrate. Lastly, the germ, like the bran, contains fiber, protein, iron, and B vitamins, but it most notably also contains omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids, or essential fatty acids (1).

A refined grain is a grain stripped of all of its layers except the endosperm. Sure, the product may have a smoother texture and may last longer on the shelf, but it is now missing the fiber, vitamins, and fats that are present in a whole grain product. Enrichment is the process of adding iron and B vitamins back into a grain once it has been refined. Despite the fact that most of the components lost during refining are replaced in enrichment, studies show that there are important nutrient interactions in whole grains that cannot be replicated in
refined grains. Plus, two important components of a whole grain, fiber and essential fatty acids, are missing in enriched products (1).

And what exactly are fiber and essential fatty acids, and why do we need them? Fiber, sometimes referred to as “roughage,” helps regulate bowel movements, lowers blood sugar and cholesterol levels, and may even prevent colon cancer. Eating more fiber also makes you feel fuller for longer! Essential fatty acids are fats that your body cannot make, so you must get them from your diet. These fatty acids help maintain a healthy immune (or disease defense) system, maintain proper blood pressure, and control blood clotting, among other benefits (2).

**How to change your tires**

So, how many servings of whole grains should you eat, and how can you easily change a diet filled with refined grains to one rich in whole grains? First, you should know that a whole grain food is either in the form of the grain itself or it is a food that contains whole grain as an ingredient. For example, when you eat wild or brown rice, quinoa, or popcorn, you are essentially eating whole grain kernels. However, when you eat whole-grain crackers or bread, you are eating food made with whole grains as an ingredient. According to the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, or set of guidelines published by the U.S. Department of Agriculture every five years, we should make at least half our grains whole. This translates to about three ounces of whole grains per day. To put this into perspective, one medium-sized slice of bread is about one ounce (2). Here are some suggestions as to how you, the working parent, can increase whole grains in your diet and in the diet of your family:

- Eat whole-grain cereal or oatmeal for quick, easy breakfasts
- Make sandwiches with whole-wheat bread, wraps, or rolls
- Prepare those spaghetti dinners with whole-wheat pasta
- Make wild or brown rice as a side
- Bake delicious desserts with whole-wheat flour
- Snack on popcorn or whole-grain crackers

**Watch out for the potholes!**

More often than not, potholes are the main culprits for those inconvenient flat tires. Sometimes, the potholes are gapingly obvious, and they are relatively easy to avoid. Other
times, they are smaller and more discreet. These sneaky potholes seem to appear out of
nowhere and only a trained driver with a keen eye can spot and avoid them. The point is that
when navigating the grocery store, beware of the potholes!

Companies use a variety of marketing and advertising tactics to make you believe you
are purchasing a whole-grain product. If there is no mention of whole grain on the product’s
packaging, you are most likely looking at a refined or enriched grain. You can easily avoid
purchasing these products if you are searching for whole grains. The small, sneaky potholes,
however, are the products that claim they are “made with whole grain.” This does not mean
that the product is whole-grain. For a product to truly be a whole-grain product, the first
ingredient listed must be the whole-grain ingredient. If the product says it is refined or
enriched, it is not a whole-grain product. Also, multi-grain is not equivalent to whole-grain, and
a dark-colored bread doesn’t necessarily mean it’s whole-grain either. To become a trained
supermarket navigator and to ensure you are getting the whole-grain products you want, keep
an eye out for the Whole Grain Stamp.

Since not every whole-grain product has this stamp, look for the following common first
ingredients on the whole-grain product’s box: whole grain [name of grain], whole [name of
grain], whole [grain] flour, and oats (2).

It’s ok to call Triple A!

While changing your own tire is fine if you know what you’re doing, calling Triple A or
some other such service is your best bet. They know how to properly change a tire and how to
do so quickly. What’s the take home message here? Never hesitate to use the resources
available to you to learn more about whole grains. Rent a nutrition textbook from the library,
do some research on the internet, or even consult a dietitian.

It is all too easy to get tricked into buying what you think is a whole-grain product when
in reality, it is a refined grain camouflaged as a whole grain with sneaky advertising. The truth is
that getting a flat tire is not the end of the world, and neither is consuming some refined grains.
But why would you drive around on a spare tire that simply does not do the job as well as your
real tire does? The answer is that you wouldn’t. So the next time you’re at the grocery store,
watch out for all the potholes, and make at least half your grains whole!
References
