

May 2009 | webmd.com | R. Morgan Griffin | Nutrition

The Benefits of Healthy Whole Foods



What's the difference between whole foods and processed foods?

Healthy whole foods: you might know that you're supposed to eat them. But do you really know what they are?

"We live in a society that eats so much processed and manufactured food, that I think there's some genuine confusion about what qualifies as a whole food," says Tara Gidus, RD, a spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association. Even for the health conscious, the phrase gets tangled up with other terms. Whole foods might be organic, or locally grown, or pesticide-free. But they aren't necessarily. The definition of healthy whole foods is much simpler.

"When you eat whole foods, you're getting the food in its natural state," Gidus tells WebMD. "You're getting it intact, with all of the vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients that are in the food." Basically, it's the healthy whole food, rather than the bits that remain after refinement and processing. It's the difference between an apple and apple juice, or a baked potato and mashed potatoes.

While whole foods might be associated with the upscale grocery store of the same name, they are available to all of us anywhere in the country. Most dietitians feel that eating healthy whole foods has all sorts of benefits. Their nutrients may help to keep your immune system strong and protect you from disease.

Healthy Whole Foods

Many studies have found that a diet high in healthy foods like fruits, vegetables, and whole grains are associated with a reduced risk of diseases such as:

So what's so good about healthy whole foods? For one, they're loaded with fiber, vitamins, and minerals. They also contain phytochemicals, the general name for natural compounds in plants. While thousands of individual phytochemicals have been identified, countless more remain unknown. They help in different ways. Some are antioxidants, which protect cells against damage. Examples of antioxidant phytochemicals are flavonoids, carotenoids, and lycopene.

Usually, the term whole foods is connected to vegetables, fruits, and grains, but any dietitian will agree that eating a skinless chicken breast is preferable to eating processed chicken nuggets.

One problem with processed food is that, during manufacturing, many healthy nutrients are removed.

For instance, "When whole grains are refined, the bran and germ of the grain are often removed," says Kaiser. Some nutrients are lost, most significantly fiber. But during the enrichment process, nutrients may be artificially added back in. But even after enrichment, refined grains are less nutritious than the whole grains you started with.

READ MORE
AT THE
JUICE BAR

May 2009 | webmd.com | R. Morgan Griffin | Nutrition

NOTE: Some sentiments contained within "What We're Reading" articles may not strictly conform with Simple Again's nutritional outlook. We read articles containing opposing information all the time and derive our nutritional philosophies from the latest science, the opinions of experts worldwide and our anecdotal experiences in the field. We keep an open mind and a strong affinity for fact-based evidence to help make the world of nutrition "Simple Again" for you.

The Benefits of Healthy Whole Foods



What's the difference between whole foods and processed foods?

Healthy whole foods: you might know that you're supposed to eat them. But do you really know what they are?

"We live in a society that eats so much processed and manufactured food, that I think there's some genuine confusion about what qualifies as a whole food," says Tara Gidus, RD, a spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association. Even for the health conscious, the phrase gets tangled up with other terms. Whole foods might be organic, or locally grown, or pesticide-free. But they aren't necessarily. The definition of healthy whole foods is much simpler.

"When you eat whole foods, you're getting the food in its natural state," Gidus tells WebMD. "You're getting it intact, with all of the vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients that are in the food." Basically, it's the healthy whole food, rather than the bits that remain after refinement and processing. It's the difference between an apple and apple juice, or a baked potato and mashed potatoes.

While whole foods might be associated with the upscale grocery store of the same name, they are available to all of us anywhere in the country. Most dietitians feel that eating healthy whole foods has all sorts of benefits. Their nutrients may help to keep your immune system strong and protect you from disease.

Healthy Whole Foods

Many studies have found that a diet high in healthy foods like fruits, vegetables, and whole grains are associated with a reduced risk of diseases such as:

So what's so good about healthy whole foods? For one, they're loaded with fiber, vitamins, and minerals. They also contain phytochemicals, the general name for natural compounds in plants. While thousands of individual phytochemicals have been identified, countless more remain unknown. They help in different ways. Some are antioxidants, which protect cells against damage. Examples of antioxidant phytochemicals are flavonoids, carotenoids, and lycopene.

Usually, the term whole foods is confined to vegetables, fruits, and grains. But any dietitian will agree that eating a skinless chicken breast is preferable to eating processed chicken nuggets.

One problem with processed food is that, during manufacture, many healthy nutrients are removed.

For instance, "When whole grains are refined, the bran and the coat of the grain are often removed," says Kaiser. Some nutrients are lost, most significantly fiber. Then, during the enrichment process, nutrients may be artificially added back in. But even after enrichment, the final product is likely to be less nutritious than the whole grains you started with.

The Synergy of Healthy Whole Foods

"One of the biggest advantages of eating whole foods is that you're getting the natural synergy of all of these nutrients together," says Gidus.

Gidus points to studies of vitamin E, selenium, and a number of antioxidants. We know that when they're eaten in food, they have all sorts of health benefits. But studies of the single vitamins and minerals in supplement form have not shown the same success. Why? "It could be the natural combination and interaction of all of these different phytochemicals and proteins that give a food its health benefit," Gidus says. "Trying to extract a single nutrient and take it by itself may not work."

There's another thing. We simply don't know all of the nutrients in a food that make it healthy.

"Nutrition science is always discovering new components of foods, things that we didn't know are there," says Kaiser. "Many of them are not even available in supplement form." If we don't know what they are, we obviously can't synthesize them.

Avoiding Additives in Food

The nutrients lost during refinement are not the only disadvantage of eating processed foods. What's added can also be a problem.

A lot of health conscious people are wary of the preservatives and chemicals that are added to processed and manufactured foods. You know -- the ones with the scary-sounding eight-syllable names. But in fact, Kaiser says that some of the worst food additives are household words.

"I think the most worrisome additives are not the preservatives," says Kaiser. "It's the salt, sugar, and saturated and trans fats." While there's been a lot of attention paid to the risks of trans fats in recent years, Kaiser thinks salt is gravely underestimated.

"As a country, we eat way too much salt," she tells WebMD, and observes that it's closely associated with high blood pressure and numerous other health problems.

With all of the extra fat and sugar in processed foods, the calories can quickly add up. That leads to weight gain. But eating more healthy whole foods may actually help you maintain or lose weight. The natural fiber in many vegetables, fruits, and grains may fill you up without adding many calories, Gidus says.

The Cost of Whole Foods

There's another bonus to eating healthy whole foods. Although the name may now be synonymous with that fancy grocery store, whole foods are much cheaper than processed foods. They're also available everywhere.

"Generally, the more processed things are, the higher the cost," says Kaiser. "A bag of healthy brown rice is going to be cheaper than a fancy prepackaged rice mix."

Of course, there may be a different cost to eating healthy whole foods: the preparation time. It's hard to deny that popping a processed sandwich pocket in the microwave for three minutes is easier than cooking a proper meal with whole-food ingredients.

But Gidus stresses that you don't need to cut out all processed foods. The goal is just to decrease the number of processed foods you eat and increase the proportion of healthy whole foods. That isn't hard, especially when it comes to snacks. The next time need something to tide you over, eat a handful of nuts or a piece of fruit instead. It's no harder than reaching for an energy bar -- you'll even be spared the labor of unwrapping it.

The other key to a healthy diet is variety. It's easy to get caught up in the details -- the nutritional value of specific healthy whole foods, and exactly how much you need of each. But Gidus and Kaiser say the best advice is to relax and just eat a wide variety of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Not only is it simple, but it's the best way to be sure you're getting all the nutrients you need.

"After some research into this, my husband decided that the smartest thing he could do was eat as many fruits and vegetables as he could stand every day," says Kaiser. "That's not very scientific, but it isn't bad advice."

CHECK OUT MORE OF WHAT WE'RE READING:



www.facebook.com/ProjectPFC



www.twitter.com/ProjectPFC



www.pinterest.com/ProjectPFC