



Fill Up On Guilt-Free Carbs

Here's how to prepare one of the most nutritious foods—whole grains—without packing on the pounds.

New nutrition studies revealed that whole grains—like bulgur, amaranth, buckwheat, and barley cut heart-disease risk by 21 percent and diabetes risk by 30 percent, and that antioxidants in grains reduce inflammation in the body, protecting against diseases like asthma and arthritis. They're also rich in fiber and B vitamins. On top of all that, whole grains are digested slowly, so they keep you full longer, helping you keep your weight in check. You could get the recommended three daily servings of whole grains from whole-wheat bread and cold cereal, but why not try them in their natural form? Follow these tips, for meals that will be fast, easy, and delicious.

Toast them first

This will add a depth of flavor to your dishes. Toast the grains in a sauté pan on top of the stove, or put them in the oven. Simply heat for a few minutes; remove when they start to give off a nutty aroma.

Vary the cooking liquid

Enhance your dish by using fruit juice (good if you're having the grains for breakfast), broth (to give them a savory flavor), or even tomato juice (perfect with brown rice or bulgur). If you use water, toss in garlic, ginger, or your favorite herbs to add some zip.

Spice them up

Grains take on the flavor of the ingredients they're paired with, so pick a flavor combo you like—scallions, red pepper, broccoli, and soy sauce for an Asian twist, for instance, or chickpeas, garlic, cumin, lemon, and parsley for a Mediterranean slant—and start experimenting.

Pay attention to cooking times

Overcooked grains are mushy and bland. Many of them, like amaranth or quinoa, are ready in as little as 15 minutes; others, like barley and wheat berries, can take up to 45. Taste them close to the end of the cooking time—you want them to be slightly chewy, not soft. Improve their texture by fluffing: Run a fork gently through the grains, then cover and let sit five minutes before serving.

Serve them warm

Whenever you prepare grains, cook more than you need for a recipe because they keep in the fridge, tightly covered, for up to five days. But bring them to room temperature or reheat them before serving. When chilled, the starches in grains harden and the flavors fade a bit.

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