

“Whole Wheat, or Not Whole Wheat: That is The Question!”

The title might sound a little funny, but it is a very important question. As discussed in our first article, the recommendation for teenagers is three to seven servings of whole-grains every day. If eating whole-grains were that important, then it would make sense to know if what you are eating is truly whole-grain or not.

Everywhere you turn these days someone is talking about whole-grain foods. Whether you turn on the television or read a billboard, someone is referring to the USDA's recommendation to increase whole-grains in our diets. While the recommendation is valid, what are the best sources of whole-grain food?

General Mills would have you believe it is a bowl of Lucky Charms. Unfortunately, this is not true; commercial whole-grain cereals, breads and pastas for the most part, no longer contain the good fats (lipids and sterols) that make eating whole-grains essential. In addition, you would be surprised to know, “whole-grain” food only has to have 51% of its ingredients from whole-grain sources. Thus, raising the question, “Whole Wheat, or Not Whole Wheat”?

Our family grinds our wheat fresh and makes our own fresh bread. If this bread lasts more than three days, it begins to grow mold. Ask yourself then, how is it that a box of whole-grain cereal can have a shelf life of over a year, or a loaf of whole-grain bread can last on the store shelves for weeks?

The answer is simple; it is not possible if they contain these good fats! Fresh grain once it is processed does not have shelf life. The oil in grains is spoilage prone and has to be removed from commercial whole-grain foods. Not only that, when you see the word preservative on the label, it is not quite what you think: A more accurate description would be “deadative”. A role these “preservatives” serve is to kill any living oils or enzymes that make it through processing. Thus ensuring a box of cereal or loaf of bread enjoys a long and happy shelf life.

Why are whole-grains so necessary for the junior tennis player? For one, they provide a multitude of nutrients such as complex carbohydrates, vitamins, and minerals. However, their unique role in the diet is not specifically to provide those components; and while whole-grain products also contain fiber, something everyone needs to increase in their diet, fiber is not what makes whole-grains so special.

What really differentiates whole-grains from other foods is their lipid and sterol content (good fats). This is important to note for the junior tennis player, because as we have already discussed, nutrition is a very important part of the equation for success on the court. This particular piece of the nutrition puzzle is foundational because cells need these good fats to function efficiently.

In fact, in recent years, two Nobel Prizes in chemistry were given to the scientists who discovered the role of the cell membrane in assimilating nutrients and eliminating waste. Grain oils were proven to play an essential role in both of these processes. Furthermore, scientists from all over the world have accumulated over 100 years of research regarding these good fats (essential fatty acids) that come from wheat, soy and brown rice.

The importance of these good fats from whole-grains can be summed up like this: *Our bodies are made up of trillions of cells and we are only as healthy as our cells are.* Being deficient in these good fats is directly linked to rises in degenerative disease in our country. To quote Dr's Siguel and Lerman of Boston University Medical Center in a recent Time Magazine article, "Essential fatty acid deficiency is perhaps the most important health problem in America today."

The USDA estimates less than 10% of the population meet the minimum suggested intake for whole-grains and to complicate things more, the "whole-grain" products they are consuming do not contain the very thing that makes eating them so important. What is a junior player to do? For one, do not buy into the marketing hype that would have you believe you can get the whole-grains you need from a bowl of Trix. Additionally, adjust your diet to include real whole-grains.

One example of an easy adjustment would be to replace white rice with brown. Another great way to include more whole-grains would be to cook a mixture of wheat berries, barley, and millet as if you were cooking a pot of rice. Then simply refrigerate it and serve it for breakfast topped with yogurt. This whole-grain breakfast is great with some nuts, fruit or dried fruit as well. This nutritious breakfast will put you well on your way to filling the whole-grain gap and give your cells the nutrients they need to keep you energized on and off the court.

Finally, even though commercial foods are stripped of these good fats, consume whole-grain foods; they are much better for your blood sugar than white rice, white bread and white pasta. Additionally, if you find yourself in the 90% of the population that is not getting enough whole-grains in your diet, make the prudent choice to supplement the gap!