Choosing Breakfast Cereals

Ready-to-eat cereal is one of the most popular breakfast choices in the United States. According to PBS Kids, every year Americans eat enough cereal to stretch a chain of the empty boxes to the moon and back.

Cereal is a quick, easy, nutritious way to start the day. Your breakfast cereal should provide the right amounts of certain nutrients needed to help you maintain a blood glucose level above fasting level. This helps you feel better than if you eat a meal high in carbohydrates only or don’t eat anything.

When you have plenty of time, sit down and enjoy a bowl of cereal and milk with a glass of 100% fruit juice. But when you have to eat on the run, grab a dry handful of cereal, a whole piece of fruit, and a bottle or carton of low-fat milk.

What a Breakfast Cereal Should Provide
Your cereal should be nutrient dense and contain plenty of fiber but very little sugar and fat. Generally a one-ounce serving of hot or cold breakfast cereal should contain:

- 100-200 calories (ideally less than 120 calories).
- protein (2 or more grams*).
- fiber (3 grams* or more, preferably 5 grams* or more).
- sugar (8 grams* or less).
- fat (less than 3 grams* of fat and no trans fat).
- between 10 and 25% of the Daily Value for key vitamins and minerals (e.g. iron, folate, B6 and B12).

* A gram is a metric unit to measure weight. It is about the weight of a paper clip.

What Counts as a One-ounce Serving?
It is important to understand what counts as a one-ounce serving, because most Americans are used to eating servings much larger than that.

In ready-to-eat breakfast cereal, a one-ounce serving is 1 cup flakes or rounds or 1¼ cup puffed cereal. A one-ounce serving of a cooked cereal is ½ cup. For example, a serving of oatmeal equals: ½ cup cooked; 1 packet instant, or 1 ounce dry (regular or quick).

Granola & “Natural” Cereals
These cereals may contain more fat, sugars or sodium than you would expect, and many have saturated fats from coconut and palm oils. A healthier alternative is muesli, made with grains, nuts, and dried fruit.

Granola-type cereals and cereals with nuts contain more fat. Cereals with dried fruit are naturally higher in sugar.

Combine Cereals for Added Benefits
If your favorite cereal is not the most nutritious choice, then try mixing it with one that is. Together they will give you the flavor you like and the nutrients you need. For example, Cheerios® combined with your favorite Rice Krispies® adds more fiber and key nutrients without adding fat or sugar. Also, a handful of a bran cereal added to Frosted Flakes® provides more fiber and protein with no additional sugars.

Cereal Bars
Choose cereal bars by the same selection guidelines as dry cereal. They should be high-fiber, low-fat and low-sugar. Remember to have some fruit and low-fat milk or yogurt along with them.
**Cooked Cereals**

A few examples of fiber-rich cooked cereals include: oatmeal; rolled oats; grits; cream of wheat, and whole-grain couscous. The nutritional content of “instant” cooked cereals is comparable to other cooked cereals. However, “instant” cereals may contain more sodium, so read the Nutrition Facts label.

To add flavor and nutrition to cooked cereals:
- top with fresh fruit.
- blend in chopped fruit (fresh or dried), nuts or grated low-fat cheese.
- use 100% fruit juice, low-fat or fat-free milk as the cooking liquid.
- add dry milk to fortify with extra calcium.
- jazz up with spices (e.g. cinnamon, nutmeg, allspice or cloves).

**What to Look for on the Food Label**

Read the Nutrition Facts label and select a breakfast cereal containing more nutrients per serving among brands. This includes nutrients such as vitamins, minerals, carbohydrate and protein. The Nutrition Facts label has a column for cereal only and another column for cereal with added milk.

Without breakfast, it is hard to get adequate fiber, vitamins and minerals in your diet. Most of today’s breakfast cereals are fortified with vitamins and minerals, ranging from 10% to 100% of the Daily Value (DV).

Do not depend on your morning ready-to-eat cereal to provide you with 100% of the Daily Values for certain vitamins and minerals. Instead, you should get these nutrients from vegetables, fruits and whole grains, which also provide fiber, phytochemicals and other antioxidants. If a cereal provides 100% of the Daily Value for vitamins and minerals, then it is comparable to a nutrient supplement.

Most cereals do not provide much vitamin C, calcium, Vitamin D or phosphorous. To add these nutrients, enjoy milk or yogurt with your cereal, and drink a vitamin C-rich beverage along with it.

Cereals with added soy protein, flax, and dried fruit usually do not contain enough of those ingredients to improve your health as they may claim.

Look for nutritious cereals, both hot and cold, that are made of whole grain and are high in fiber but low in sugar. MyPyramid and the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend eating 6 ounces of grain products every day. At least half of this amount, or 3 ounces should be whole grains. This is based on a 2,000 calorie diet, so the exact amount you need depends on your age, sex, and level of physical activity.

**Fiber:** Whole grains are good sources of dietary fiber, but most refined (processed) grains contain little fiber. Look for a cereal with at least 3 grams of fiber per serving, preferably at least 5 grams.

You can add even more fiber by topping a high-fiber, whole grain cereal with fruit or a handful of nuts. Cereal provides carbohydrates and a little protein, milk provides protein and calcium, and nuts add some fat to keep you feeling full longer.

When looking at the fiber content on the Nutrition Facts label, 5% daily value (DV) or less means the product is low in fiber, and 20% DV or higher means the product is high in fiber.

Check the ingredients list for “whole grain” words such as: whole wheat; whole grain oats; bran; barley and whole corn.

**Amount of Fiber Needed:** Aim for 25-40 grams of fiber every day by eating more whole grains, vegetables and fruits. At least 10 grams of the total fiber should come from sources of soluble fiber like: beans; oats and oat bran; barley; fruits and psyllium.

Gradually add fiber-rich whole grains to your diet so that your digestive system can adjust. Too much fiber all at once may cause bloating, flatulence (gas), diarrhea, and/or cramping. Drink plenty of liquids and chew foods slowly to break down the fiber and allow the digestive system to work smoothly and comfortably.

**Benefits of Fiber:** Dietary fiber helps reduce blood cholesterol levels, may lower risk of heart disease, helps reduce constipation and diverticulosis, and helps give a feeling of fullness with fewer calories.
**Sugar:** Avoid low density “candy cereals” and reach for ones with little or no added sugar. Select a cereal that has 8 grams or less of sugar per serving. Add sugar yourself so you can control the amount.

If you do buy sweetened cereal, however, use the same criteria that you would for choosing any cereal. Compare the number of sugar grams among your favorite cereal brands, and choose one with the fewest grams, which indicates the lowest amount of sugar.

Look for “sugar” words on the ingredient list. Here are a few of the names for added sugars: brown sugar; honey; molasses; high fructose corn syrup; corn sweetener; maltose; dextrose; sucrose, and fruit juice concentrates.

Added sugar doesn’t automatically make a cereal unhealthy. Sweetened and unsweetened cereals have about the same cavity-promoting potential, so encourage all family members to practice good oral hygiene after eating them.

**Shopping in the Breakfast Cereal Aisle**

**Compare Price Per Cup:** One cup is a serving size for most ready-to-eat breakfast cereals, so compare the price per cup instead of the cost per ounce as indicated by the unit price on the shelves of many stores. Some cereals are heavier (e.g. raisin bran type cereal), so you get fewer cups for the weight. Look at the Nutrition Facts label to find the number of servings per box. Some people may eat less of the heavier type cereals, but other people may eat about the same amount for most cereals.

**Look Up & Look Down:** Be aware of where the cereals are placed on the grocery shelves. More expensive brands are at “eye-level,” or at a level that makes them easy to see, grab and toss in the cart. Store brands that may be cheaper and just as good are placed on higher or lower grocery shelves. Lower-priced items are on the bottom shelves.

Sweet cereals are placed on the lower shelves at children’s eye levels. Cereal boxes are designed to attract kids’ attention. Manufacturers use attention-grabbers such as: colors; graphics; famous people; cartoon characters, and gimmicks (e.g. prizes inside the box and contests to win great prizes).

**Other Cereal Tips**

Drink all the milk in your cereal bowl, because milk is a good source of protein. Besides, many vitamins and minerals are sprayed onto the cereal and go into the milk.

For a nutritious snack, enjoy nutrient dense cereal straight out of the box.

On the way to work or school eat a cereal bar or cereal stirred into a container of yogurt.

Add one to two cups of cereal to cookie recipes for additional texture, fiber and nutrients.

**Nutrient Content Databases**

Would you like to know the nutrient content of specific cereals? Then refer to the *USDA National Nutrient Database for Standard Reference, Release 21* and *USDA What’s in the Foods You Eat, 3.0*.

**For More Information**

Breakfast is the most important meal of the day, and beginning your day without it is like trying to start your car without gas. Refer to HGIC 4106, *Brighten Up With Breakfast* for more information on:

- non-traditional breakfast ideas.
- grab-and-go breakfasts.
- healthy fast food breakfast choices at the drive-through window.
- tips on adapting muffin recipes to make them more healthful.
- kid-friendly breakfast recipes.

 HGIC 4019, *Whole Grains* and HGIC 4052, *Fiber* contains additional information on the importance of choosing whole grains and getting enough fiber in your diet.

**Sources:**
