

# Parent Communications— Balanced Diet Theme

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Adapted from President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2006, Food & Fun After School Unit 5 Parent Communications.

**Newsletter article:** Use this *Planet Health* article in your class or school newsletter. Think about publishing a *Planet Health* message each month to help parents and students tune in to healthy lifestyle choices and tune out of screen time.

## Get the Whole Story on Whole Grains

Good carbs, bad carbs. Americans have been hearing a lot about carbohydrate—carb for short—mostly from the weight-loss industry. But there's more to the carbohydrate story than weight control, and it's all about the health benefits of whole grains.

Whole-grain foods contain good carbohydrate. They're packed with complex carbohydrate, fiber, and other nutrients to keep your blood sugar steady, your cholesterol low, and your digestive system working well. That's why people who eat a diet rich in whole grains have lower incidence of diabetes, heart disease, colon cancer, and diverticular disease. Although those diseases are mostly seen in adults, a growing number of children are affected by type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, and overweight. Those conditions, combined with a growing trend of kids eating more processed foods that are high in fat, salt, and added sugar, make childhood the perfect time for parents to instill healthful eating habits.

What are whole grains? Any food made from wheat, rice, oats, cornmeal, or barley is a grain product. Think of whole wheat pasta, whole wheat bread, whole grain cereal, and tortillas. Whole grains contain the entire grain kernel. Examples are whole wheat flour, whole oats, cracked (bulgur) wheat, whole cornmeal, and brown rice.

Refined grains have been milled, a process that removes part of the grain kernel to achieve a finer texture. As a result, much of the fiber and nutrients are stripped. Examples of refined-grain products are white bread, white rice, and white pasta. Enriched white flour has had some of the B vitamins and iron added back into it, but the fiber and many other healthy nutrients are not restored.

## How to Get Enough Whole Grains in Your Diet

If you shop for your family's food, try to purchase whole grains at least half of the time. To do that, you need to look for key words on the food labels, including the ingredient list. Here's what to look for.

- Read the nutrition label. Choose breads and cereals that have at least 3 grams of fiber per serving. Fiber content is a good indicator of whether a grain has been milled or not. Food with more fiber probably has more of the good stuff from the grain hull in it.

- Read the ingredient list. Choose breads and cereals that list a whole grain as the *first* ingredient. Examples are whole wheat, cracked wheat, barley, oats, rye, brown rice, whole cornmeal, and millet.
- Watch for misleading terms. Foods labeled as “multigrain,” “100% wheat,” “made with whole grains,” “cracked wheat,” and “seven grain” often are not made with mostly whole grains.
- Watch for added sugar—especially in ready-to-eat breakfast cereals and so-called breakfast bars. Choose products low or moderate in sugar—5 to 10 grams per serving most of the time. Save the sweet stuff for an occasional treat, or mix it with a low-sugar cereal to cut back on the sugar.

Optional table:

### Examples of High-Fiber or Low-Sugar Ready-to-Eat Cereals

Product	Fiber (grams per serving)	Sugar (grams per serving)
Chex wheat	5 g fiber	5 g sugar
Cheerios	3 g fiber	1 g sugar
Total	3 g fiber	5 g sugar
Wheaties	3 g fiber	4 g sugar

**E-mail message:** Use this sample e-mail message to send *Planet Health* messages home to parents.

### **Subject: *Planet Health* Tips for Parents: Go for Whole Grains**

Dear Parents:

Did you know that popcorn is a whole grain snack? This month our class will use the *Planet Health* curriculum to explore the concepts of (insert curriculum goals here), using carbohydrate and eating a balanced diet as a case study. Here are our key messages:

- Whole grain foods are packed with flavor, fiber, and healthy nutrients.
- Processed grains do not have as much of the “good stuff,” especially fiber.
- Breakfast is a great time to eat whole grain cereals, waffles, or bagels.

You may be aware that the fiber in whole grains keeps you feeling full longer and has many health benefits for disease prevention and intestinal health. But did you know that heart disease and other chronic conditions begin to develop in the teenage years or sooner? For this reason, the preventive benefits of eating whole-grain foods apply to children also.

You can help your family get the health benefits of whole grains by following these *Planet Health* tips for parents:

- Make at least half your grains *whole grains*. This includes whole grain breads, breakfast cereals, brown rice, bulgur, barley, oats, and corn (with the kernel).
- When purchasing whole grain cereals and breads, read the label to be sure that a whole grain is the first ingredient listed and that the product has at least 3 grams of fiber per serving.
- Not all whole grain (ready-to-eat) breakfast cereals are equally nutritious. Many cereals labeled “whole grain” are also very high in sugar. Choose cereals (at least most of the time) that are either low in sugar (5 grams or less) or moderate in sugar (no more than 10 grams) per serving.
- Set a good example by serving whole grain foods at meals and snacks.

Check out the following sites for good information on carbohydrate and your child.

- Harvard School of Public Health: [www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/carbohydrates.html](http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/carbohydrates.html)
- Nemours Foundation: [www.kidshealth.org/parent/nutrition\\_fit/nutrition/sugar.html](http://www.kidshealth.org/parent/nutrition_fit/nutrition/sugar.html)
- USDA: [www.MyPyramid.gov/pyramid/grains.html](http://www.MyPyramid.gov/pyramid/grains.html)