

## Sprouted-grain breads: The facts

Most of the health advantages touted by its proponents are valid only when compared against white breads; whole-grain breads are comparable. After that, it's pretty much a matter of taste.

October 12, 2009

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Sprouted-grain bread offerings in the market have been slowly but steadily on the uptick of late, and a number of health claims have attached themselves to the spongy, nutty-tasting loaves: more digestible, richer in protein and higher in vitamins and minerals compared with other breads.

But are the claims true? Yes -- and no. Sprouted-grain products have distinct nutritional advantages over white breads, but when compared to other whole-grain breads, they're usually nutritionally comparable -- although nutrient contents can vary, depending on the sprouts included.

First, a quick primer on what sprouted bread is, and how it differs from white and whole-wheat bread:

Whole-wheat bread is made by grinding wheat kernels -- comprised of a vitamin-rich germ, a protein- and carbohydrate-dense endosperm and an outer shell called the bran -- into whole-wheat flour.

White bread is made by removing the wheat kernel's germ and bran, grinding up only the endosperm into flour.

Sprouted-grain breads are made from wheat kernels (often called wheat berries) that are allowed to sprout and then ground up and baked into bread. Because the kernels are not ground into flour, such breads are often referred to as "flourless." (Sprouted-grain breads do, however, contain gluten -- so they are no easier to metabolize for people who are unable to digest this wheat protein.)

Because they're made from whole-wheat kernels, sprouted-grain breads are a good source of whole grains, says Ruth Frechman, a registered dietitian in Burbank and spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Assn. But on the whole, she adds, the types and amounts of nutrients -- such as calcium, iron, niacin and fiber -- in sprouted-grain breads are often comparable to what's found in whole-grain breads.

Many sprouted-grain breads are made from not just wheat sprouts but a variety of sprouts, such as millet, barley, oat and even lentil and soy, says Barbara Davis, a nutritionist and vice president of scientific strategy at HealthFocus International, a St. Petersburg, Fla.-based market research firm focused on nutrition and health.

Sprouted-grain breads made from an array of grains and legumes can provide a complete set of amino acids, the building blocks of proteins, Frechman says. Though grains aren't most people's main source of protein, these breads can be kind of a good idea for vegetarians, she adds.

Sprouted-grain breads may also be slightly higher in protein because some carbohydrates are lost in the process of sprouting -- resulting in a final product in which protein represents a greater fraction of the sprout than it did in the germ, says Lloyd Rooney, a professor of soil and crop sciences at Texas A&M University in College Station.

Sprouting also causes some trace minerals, such as zinc, to be "freed up," or released, from the bran of the wheat kernel, says Rooney, who is also a spokesman for the Institute of Food Technologists. This can account for some small differences in nutrient content between sprouted-grain and other whole-grain breads. But the difference is inconsequential, he says: "We're not nutrient-deficient."

Sprouted-grain breads may not have much of an edge over other whole-grain breads, but both are more healthful than white, refined-flour breads, Frechman says. In the 1990s and 2000s, several large-scale studies showed that people who ate more whole grains lowered their risk of coronary heart disease by 20% to 40%. White breads are often enriched with iron and B vitamins that are lost when the bran and germ are removed from the wheat kernel during processing. And processed white flour is usually fortified with folic acid, resulting in higher levels of the B vitamin in white bread. But only whole-grain products contain the complete array of antioxidants and phytonutrients -- as well as lots of fiber -- present in whole-wheat kernels.

Though whole-grain breads do have some health benefits over white breads, the advantages of specialty products, including sprouted-grain breads, may be mostly psychological, Rooney says.

Research by HealthFocus International shows that American consumers prefer foods that are naturally rich sources of vitamins and minerals over foods that are fortified or enriched with vitamins and minerals.

Taste and texture are the top reasons to choose sprouted-grain breads over other whole grain breads, Frechman says -- because you're essentially eating the same grain. But the unique characteristics of sprouted grain breads may not put them at the top of most consumers' shopping lists. Their earthy taste is distinct from that of white bread. ("If you're looking for Wonder Bread, you're probably not going to like it," Davis says.)

And because they don't tend to contain preservatives, most sprouted-grain breads must be kept

refrigerated or frozen.

"Would I spend a lot of money on sprouted grain? No -- but I'm a cheapskate," Rooney said. "I mean, gee whiz -- if someone wants to sprout their grains, so be it."