

The New Old Breakfast

by Charles Stuart Platkin

Mornings are a bit crazy in my house, and the thought of eating a "balanced, healthy" breakfast in the middle of pure chaos is daunting. Of course, grabbing a donut, muffin, or a few McDonald's Egg McMuffins is not the healthiest of choices. But luckily there's a quick, low fat, low calorie alternative that's been around long before the advent of the Croissan'wich -- good old-fashioned cereal. Compared to other breakfasts, a large bowl of even the most nutritionally dreadful cereal (about 400 calories) is a bargain. Check out some of these breakfast horrors:

-Cinnabon Pecanbon: 1100 calories, 56g fat

-Denny's French Toast (3 pieces): 1146 calories, 71g fat, 104g carbs

-Dunkin' Donuts plain bagel with cream cheese (4 tablespoons): 562 calories, 23g fat, 70.5g carbs

-McDonald's Bacon, Egg and Cheese Biscuit: 480 calories, 31g fat, 31g carbs

-Burger King Croissan'wich with sausage and cheese: 475 calories, 36g fat, 22g carbs

Research has shown cereal to be an excellent option for breakfast, with benefits that include reducing your risk of cardiovascular disease, promoting weight loss, relieving stress, and enhancing memory. Yet sales have been slipping over the last few years, probably due to the increased popularity of other choices (e.g., bagels, pastries, yogurt, muffins, and energy/breakfast bars), and the anti-carb movement. If you choose your cereal wisely, no other breakfast option can offer as much

fiber, calcium, and other nutrients for so few calories and so little fat.

SUGAR ALERT: Most breakfast cereals have added sugar, so the idea is to choose the ones with the least amount added. The best way to compare is by checking the nutrition label. The following ingredients should be absent, or at least lower than fourth on the ingredient list: sugar, brown sugar, molasses, corn syrup, organic cane juice, evaporated cane juice, high fructose corn syrup, and malt syrup. Even cereals that give the appearance of being "nutritious," like Special K and Product 19, can contain added sugars as key ingredients. Be aware that sometimes cereals are higher in added sugar because of the fruit (which provides health-promoting fiber). Your best bet is to do what I do: take a bowl of 100% whole wheat cereal with no added sugar, such as Puffed Kashi Natural Cereal, and add some Equal, Splenda, or Stevia with some fresh fruit.

WHOLE GRAINS ONLY: It's important to distinguish whole-grain from refined-grain cereals for their role in preventing chronic diseases. A recent study in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition reported that both total mortality and cardiovascular disease mortality were inversely associated with whole-grain, but not refined-grain, breakfast cereal intake. Whole grains also have the added advantage of filling you up faster because they're high in fiber. Fiber is the indigestible portion of plant foods that provides bulk, which makes you feel full and slows digestion -- ultimately keeping you more satisfied. Choose a cereal with at least three grams of fiber per serving.

SERVING SIZE MATTERS: Typically, we eat anywhere from one to three cups of cereal at one sitting -- not necessarily the serving size listed on the food label. Because of this, you need to closely monitor how much you're eating so you don't go overboard.

If you want to compare cereals nutritionally, keep in mind that cereals have different densities (e.g., flakes, nuggets, puffed), and as a result, it's more difficult to compare them to each other. Some are quite dense, such as Shredded Wheat or Grape Nuts, so they look like they're much higher in calories from the food label. It's tough to compare their nutritional values to less dense cereals, like Rice Krispies or Cheerios, just going by the cups (volume). In theory, the more dense the cereal (the higher the grams per serving), the less you are likely to eat. So when you're trying to pick the best cereal, check the weights listed next to the serving size (grams) and compare the calories per gram. Divide the calories by the amount of grams per serving, and compare (e.g., Grape Nuts have 3.62 calories per gram versus Cheerios, which have 3.67 calories per gram). However, if you're the type to eat that same two cups of cereal no matter which one you have, you're probably better off with the Cheerios, or you'll end up with plenty of excess calories.

LURKING FAT: Yes, some cereals contain fat. The ingredients to look out for include added nuts, coconut, and granola. Choose low-fat versions if you love granola. Stay away from items that include "partially hydrogenated oil" anywhere on the ingredient list. That's code for trans fat, and it's found in many popular cereals, including: Cinnamon Toast Crunch Cereal, Basic 4 Cereal, Total Cereal, Kellogg's Mueslix Cereal, and Post Oreo O's Cereal.

DON'T BE A HEALTH FOOL: Yes, cereals are nutritionally dense and can be very filling -- especially the ones made from whole grains. However, just because they have extra vitamins and minerals doesn't mean you can eat as much as you want. Even if a cereal boasts "High Fiber," "Excellent Source of Calcium," or "Organic," it may still contain a significant amount of sugar, sodium, calories and even fat.

HOT VERSUS COLD: Just because a cereal is hot doesn't mean it's good for you. If you have plain Quaker Old Fashioned Oats (served hot), well, the ingredient list is pretty clean compared to most of the cold cereals -- it's 100% natural rolled oats. However, the further away you get from that, they become nutritionally similar to the cold cereals, like Quaker Maple & Brown Sugar Instant Oatmeal.

CEREAL BARS ARE NOT CEREAL: Don't confuse cereal with cereal bars. In my supermarket, these bars are where they should be -- in the candy section -- right next to the Snickers bars. Some bars may be low in fat and fortified with vitamins, but they're not high in whole grains or fiber, so they're really just fortified candy bars. Also, this is just me, but it's certainly more satisfying to polish off a bowl of cereal and milk than to chomp on a small bar.

Snickers Bar (40g): 190 calories, 10g fat, 24g carbs, 1g fiber [Snickers has healthy nuts]

Cocoa Puffs Bars (40g): 160 calories, 4g fat, 26g carbs, 1g fiber

SKIM IT: Choose skim milk to go with your cereal. You get essentially the

same nutrients from drinking skim milk as you do from drinking whole milk -- minus the fat, of course -- so stick to the low calorie version and save about 64 calories and eight grams of fat per cup. The carb content is similar; skim is slightly higher, by less than half a gram.

Overall, cereal is an amazing meal, for breakfast, lunch or dinner -- in fact, maybe it could be a diet on its own. If Subway and South Beach have their own diets, why not the Cereal Diet?

Charles Stuart Platkin is a syndicated health, nutrition, and fitness columnist, author of the best-selling book, *Breaking the Pattern* (Red Mill Press, 2002), and founder of Nutricise.com. Copyright 2003 by Charles Stuart Platkin. This column is made possible by a grant from the Institute for Nutrition and Behavioral Sciences. Write to info@thedietdetective.com.

SCIENTIFIC BENEFITS OF CEREAL

REDUCE STRESS AND IMPROVE MOOD: Researchers at Cardiff University in Wales found that breakfast cereal eaters reported being in a better mood after consumption. Additionally, they found that eating breakfast cereal was associated with lower cortisol levels, an indicator of less stress.

LOSE WEIGHT: Does Special K REALLY help you lose weight? Of course not. One of the main reasons that you are likely to lose weight when you eat cereal is because it is lower in calories compared to other breakfasts. Yes, some cereals have significant amounts of added sugar and refined flour, but even those only add up to about 350-400 calories for one and a half to two cups.

The National Weight Control Registry, the largest ongoing database of individuals who have successfully maintained their weight losses, found that more than 59.7% of those champion dieters consumed cereal for breakfast on a regular basis. Just recently, a study completed in the *Journal of the American College of Nutrition* analyzed data from more than 16,000 adults and found that those who ate different types of cereals were lower in weight when compared to those who ate meat and eggs or those who skipped breakfast. (Note: the study was funded by Kellogg's.) Additionally, researchers at Purdue University found that dieters who used cereal as a meal replacement (just like Slimfast) were able to lose more weight than those who didn't use cereal.

LOWERS CHOLESTEROL: Not only is it on every box of Cheerios (as per the Food and Drug Administration), but the *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition* reported that eating cereal for breakfast regularly can lead to reduced intake of total and saturated fat in your daily diet and consequently to a reduction in your cholesterol level.

COMPARING CEREALS

When comparing cereals, make sure to adjust for serving size and weight.

GREAT CEREALS (No Sugar Added, Whole Grain)

Puffed Kashi Natural Cereal (1 cup, 25g): 70 calories, 0.5g fat (0g saturated), 13g carbohydrate, 2g fiber, 0g sugar

Post Shredded Wheat Spoon Size Cereal (1 1/4 cups, 59g): 200 calories, 1g fat (0g saturated), 47g carbs, 8g fiber, <1g sugar

Quaker Old Fashioned Oats (1/2 cup, 40g): 150 calories, 3g fat (0.5g saturated), 27g carbs, 4g fiber, 1g sugar

VERY GOOD CEREALS (High Fiber, Low Calories, Low Sugar, No Fat, Whole Grain).

Kashi Heart to Heart Cereal (3/4 cup, 33g): 110 calories, 1.5g fat (0g saturated), 25g carbs, 5g fiber, 5g sugar

General Mills Fiber One Bran Cereal (1/2 cup, 30g): 60 calories, 1g fat (0g saturated), 24g carbs, 14g fiber, 0g sugar

Kellogg's All Bran Cereal with Extra Fiber (1/2 cup, 26g): 50 calories, 1g fat (0g saturated), 20g carbs, 13g fiber, 0g sugar

Arrowhead Mills Organic Oat Bran Flakes (1 cup, 34g): 90 calories, 2g fat (0g saturated) 14g carbs, 3g fiber, 3g sugar

GOOD CEREALS (Low Fat, Low Sugar, Low Calories, Moderate Fiber)

General Mills Cheerios Cereal (1 cup, 30g): 110 calories, 2g fat (0g saturated), 22g carbs, 3g fiber, 1g sugar

Kellogg's Corn Flakes (1 cup, 28g): 100 calories, 0g fat (0g saturated), 24g carbs, 1g fiber, 2g sugar

General Mills Kix Cereal (1 1/3 cup, 30g): 120 calories, 0.5g fat (0g saturated), 26g carbs, 1g fiber, 3g sugar

Kellogg's Complete Wheat Bran Flakes Cereal (3/4 cup, 29g): 90 calories, 0.5g fat (0g saturated), 23g carbs, 5g fiber, 5g sugar

Kellogg's Product 19 Cereal (1 cup, 30g): 100 calories, 0g fat (0g saturated), 25g carbs, 1g fiber, 4g sugar

Kellogg's Special K (1 cup, 31g): 110 calories, 0g fat (0g saturated), 22g carbs, <1g fiber, 4g sugar

OKAY CEREALS (Good Fiber, Low Fat, Added Sugar)

Kellogg's Frosted Mini-Wheats Cereal (24 biscuits, 59g): 200 calories, 1g fat (0g saturated), 48g carbs, 6g fiber, 12g sugar

General Mills Multi Grain Cheerios (1 cup, 30g): 110 calories, 1g fat (0g saturated), 24g carbs, 3g fiber, 6g sugar (This has more sugar than regular Cheerios)

Quaker Life Cereal (3/4 cup, 32g): 120 calories, 1.5g fat (0g saturated), 25g carbs, 2g fiber, 6g sugar

Kellogg's Raisin Bran Cereal (1 cup, 59g): 190 calories, 1.5g fat (0g saturated), 45g carbs, 7g fiber, 19g sugar

Health Valley Soy Flakes -- Raisin Cereal (1 cup, 56g): 190 calories, 1g fat (0g saturated), 39g carbs, 4g fiber, 15g sugar

Quaker Apple Cinnamon Instant Oatmeal (1 packet, 35g): 130 calories, 1.5g fat (0.5g saturated), 27g carbs, 3g fiber, 12g sugar

Quaker Oatmeal Squares Cereal (1 cup, 56g): 210 calories, 2.5g fat (0.5g saturated), 44g carbs, 4g fiber, 9g sugar

"NOT SO GREAT" CEREALS (Either High Sugar, High Calories, High fat, and/or Little Fiber, or a combination of any of the above)

Health Valley Banana Gone Nuts Cereal (3/4 cup, 53g): 200 calories, 3g fat (0g saturated), 41g carbs, 4g fiber, 11g sugar

General Mills Lucky Charms Cereal (1 cup): 120 calories, 1g fat (0g saturated), 25g carbs, 1g fiber, 13g sugar

Post Oreo O's cereal (3/4 cup, 27g): 110 calories, 2g fat (0.5g saturated), 22g carbs,