INTRODUCTION
The grain group includes foods such as bread, tortillas, rice, pasta, and breakfast cereals made from wheat, rice, oats, cornmeal, barley, or other grains. Foods from this group provide B vitamins (thiamine, riboflavin, niacin, and folate), minerals (iron), and fiber.

Grains are divided into two subgroups: whole grains and refined grains. Whole grains contain the entire grain kernel—bran, germ, and endosperm. In refined grains, the germ and bran have been removed, which also removes the fiber, iron, and B vitamins. Refined grains replace the B vitamins and minerals in a process called “enriching.” It is usually impossible to recover fiber. For these reasons, you should eat whole grains instead of refined grains.

NUTRIENTS IN THE GRAIN GROUP
The following nutrients are found in most grains. A typical American diet is usually low in nutrients marked with an asterisk (*).

*Fiber helps reduce blood cholesterol levels, may reduce the risk of heart disease, and promotes proper bowel function. Fiber-containing foods such as grains help provide a feeling of fullness with fewer calories.

B vitamins release energy within the body, play an important role in metabolism, and help the nervous system work properly. Many refined grains are enriched with B vitamins.

*Folate helps produce red blood cells and reduces a woman’s risk of having a child with a brain or spinal cord defect.

*Iron is a mineral that carries oxygen in the blood to body cells and helps protect against infections. Iron deficiency often leads to anemia, which causes you to feel tired and weak. Many women develop iron-deficiency anemia during their childbearing years and need more meat and beans in their diet. To help reduce anemia, many foods are enriched or fortified with iron; breakfast cereals and flour are two examples.

Selenium is part of an antioxidant system and helps keep the immune system healthy.

Magnesium builds strong bones and helps muscles release energy.

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HOW MANY GRAINS ARE NEEDED?
MyPlate recommends eating between 3 and 8 ounces of grains every day, depending on your age, gender, and level of physical activity (Table 1). At least half of the servings should be from whole grains. For more information, visit www.choosemyplate.gov

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MyPlate uses the term “ounce equivalent” when suggesting amounts of grain foods to consume.

What does one ounce equivalent from the grain group mean?
• 1 regular slice of bread
• 1 cup of ready-to-eat cereal
• 1/2 cup of cooked pasta, rice, or cereal
• 3 cups popcorn
• 1 3-inch bagel
• 1 small piece of cornbread (2 1/2 x 1 inch)
• 1 small tortilla (6-inch)

CHECK THE LABEL!
Being brown in color does not mean a product contains whole grain! Foods can be colored brown by adding molasses or caramel coloring. Products labeled with phrases such as “multi-grain,” “100% wheat,” or “all-bran” frequently are not made with whole grain. Read the label carefully and follow these tips:

• Ingredients are listed in order from most to least in terms of amount. One of the first ingredients should be whole grain or the name of a certain grain (whole wheat, brown rice, rye).

• Look at the ingredient list for added sugars (corn syrup, high-fructose corn syrup, sucrose, and molasses) and oils (partially hydrogenated vegetable oils) that add extra calories.

• Look at the Nutrition Facts panel and choose products with 3 grams or more of dietary fiber and 3 grams or fewer of fat per serving. Foods are good sources of fiber if they contain 2 1/2 to 5 grams of fiber per serving; 5 or more grams per serving means “high-fiber” food.

TIPS FOR EATING MORE WHOLE GRAINS
• Add whole grains to casseroles and meatloaf.

• Try brown rice, whole-wheat pasta, bulgur, or barley as a side dish.

• Use unsweetened whole-grain cereal as breading for baked foods, as croutons for salads, or as crackers with soup.

• Substitute at least half of the amount of white flour with whole-wheat flour in recipes.

• Try whole-grain bread, pitas, or tortillas.

“GO, SLOW, WHOA” FOODS
An easy way to make smart and nutritious choices within the grain group is to use the “Go, Slow, Whoa” concept.

• “Go” foods are the most nutrient-dense; they contain more of the nutrients you need with relatively fewer calories. Eat them almost anytime, based on your calorie needs.
  – Examples: whole-grain breads, including whole-grain pita bread; whole-grain tortillas and whole-grain pasta; brown rice; hot or cold unsweetened whole-grain breakfast cereals.
• “Slow” foods are higher in calories, fat, and/or sugar than “Go” foods. Eat them sometimes, at most several times a week.
  – Examples: white refined flour, bread, rice, and pasta; French toast; taco shells; cornbread; biscuits; granola; waffles and pancakes.

• “Whoa” foods are high in calories, fat, and/or sugar and offer little nutritional value. Eat them only once in a while or on special occasions, and in small portions.
  – Examples: croissants; muffins; doughnuts; sweet rolls; crackers made with trans fats; sweetened breakfast cereals.

To learn more about “Go, Slow, and Whoa” foods, visit http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/obesity/wecan/eat-right/choosing-foods.htm.

REFERENCES

Carol Turner is the Extension Food and Nutrition Specialist and the Assistant Dietetic Internship Director in the Department of Extension Family and Consumer Sciences at NMSU. Her research interests include community nutrition initiatives that reach diverse audiences and explore strategies to improve self-management in individuals with diabetes.
Visit www.ChooseMyPlate.gov for complete information on the MyPlate plan, including recipes, healthful eating tips, and tools to track your diet and exercise.