

The Whole Truth about “Whole Grain”

By Johannah Sakimura

Published Mar 26, 2014

Shopping for whole-grain products is a whole lot more confusing than it needs to be. Companies know that [“whole grain”](#) is a major selling point with health-conscious consumers, so many use what I call the whole-grain loophole. Manufacturers add a sprinkling of whole-wheat flour to their crackers, breads, or snack bars, and then splash the words “made with whole grains” across the front of the package to give it an edge on competitors.

Unfortunately, the FDA doesn’t require manufacturers to specify exactly how much whole grain the product contains, and there’s no minimum requirement they have to reach in order to use the label. So, it takes a little detective work (AKA careful label reading) to figure out whether you’re actually making a smart choice.

If you find all of this whole-grain talk perplexing, read on. My simple picture guide will help you get to the bottom of whole-grain confusion once and for all.

First, don’t assume that breads, crackers, and other products labeled “wheat” must be “whole-wheat”. Any product made with any kind of wheat flour is a wheat product. “Wheat” only identifies the type of grain; it tells you nothing about whether the product is whole grain.

And don’t assume that products “made with whole grain” are 100% whole grain. The phrase “made with whole grain” simply tells you that the product must contain some whole grain; it could be just a tiny fraction of the total ingredients. Take this honey wheat bread, for example:



The front label screams “whole grain”, right? But if you read the ingredients list below, you’ll see that the first ingredient listed is... enriched flour.



[Enriched flour](#) is white, refined flour — the same “all-purpose” stuff that’s sitting in a bag in your cupboard. That means this bread contains mostly refined flour, NOT whole-wheat flour. This loaf does contain some “whole wheat flour,” as promised, but it’s listed much later on the ingredients panel, indicating a smaller amount. So, the bread’s front-of-package labeling is factually accurate, but it doesn’t tell the whole story.

Instead, you want to look for breads, pastas, and other products that explicitly state “100% whole grain” or “100% whole wheat,” like the loaf pictured below. This guarantees that the product is made with ONLY whole-grain flour, with no refined white flour mixed in.



Here are a few more examples of packages that can trip you up. These crackers are “baked with whole wheat” and promise “5g whole grain” per serving:



But if you check the ingredients panel, you'll again see that the crackers contain more refined (enriched) flour than whole-wheat flour.

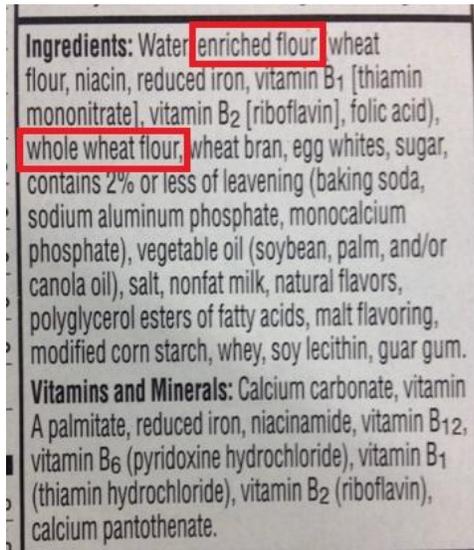


In order to count as a full serving of whole grains, a product must deliver at least 16 grams of whole grain. These crackers have just 5 grams — about a quarter of a serving. That's a measly amount, considering we should be targeting at least 3 servings, or 42 total grams whole grains, per day. But you don't need to do all of this complicated math — just look at the ingredients panel. If the product lists “enriched flour” first (as opposed to an ingredient that includes the word “whole”), you can do better.

Now, we'll move to the frozen foods aisle. How do these so-called whole-wheat waffles stack up?



The front of the box tells you that the waffles are “made with 8g of whole grain.” But, once again, the ingredients list reveals that this breakfast staple actually contains more white flour than whole wheat.



Here’s another common mistake to avoid: [Don’t assume “multigrain” or “7 grain” products must be whole grain.](#) “Multigrain” and “7 grain” simply mean that the product is made with a number of different grains. For example, in addition to wheat flour, a multigrain bread might also contain rye and barley flour. Those flours could all be refined, they could all be whole grain, or they could be a mix of both. You won’t know until you scan the label.

Take these “multigrain” pita chips, as an example:



The first ingredient is...surprise, surprise: white flour.



Sure, these pita chips contain some whole-wheat flour and some other grains, too (including rye, barley, and oats), but the major ingredient is refined white flour.

Bottom line:

- Read labels carefully when shopping for whole-grain products, including bread, crackers, cereals, and pasta.
- Ideally, choose products that clearly state “100% whole grain” or “100% whole wheat” on the package.
- The second best options are products that list “whole-wheat flour” or another whole-grain ingredient as the first ingredient, NOT enriched flour. (Heads up: Oats and brown rice are automatically whole-grain, even if they’re not preceded by the word “whole”.)

Of course, you don’t have to choose whole grains all the time. Making at least half of your grains whole is a good rule of thumb.