

Breakfast Cereals

Given the choice between a bacon butty and a bowl of cereal, most of us would pick the cereal as the healthier option. But most of us, it seems, might be wrong. Some cereals contain as much sugar as a chocolate bar and as much saturated fat as a cake – something no quantity of added vitamins and minerals is going to rectify. Breakfast is the only time of day when a single item can count for an entire meal, so a nutritious cereal is imperative to a healthy diet. The following chapter singles out the best.

WHAT GOES INTO YOUR CEREAL?

Most breakfast cereals are made from one of three ingredients: oats, rice or wheat. Each of these core ingredients has a number of nutritional benefits. Oats, for example, are thought to help lower cholesterol as part of a healthy diet, while wheat is an excellent source of fibre. However, the processing techniques used in the mass production of cereals are not good for the grains. Once they have been cooked, conditioned, flattened, toasted and shredded, much of their nutritional value and flavour is lost. The flavour will be replaced with salt, “frosted” sugar or a glaze of syrup, while the lost nutrients are restored as “added vitamins and minerals”, which can then be promoted on the box.

The level of processing involved in the production of cereal means that there is room for countless variations on the standard formula. The addition of nuts, berries, or honey to a simple cereal adds novelty value, but a better nutritional option may be to buy an unadorned version which will almost always be lower in sugar and fat and add your own toppings at home.

HEALTH CLAIMS

Given the production techniques described above, the number of health claims ascribed to popular breakfast foods might come as something of a surprise. Often, the addition of vitamins and minerals creates a halo of healthiness

around a product that is actually high in salt, sugar and fat. Fortified products can be useful, but are not a substitute for a balanced diet: a fortified cereal that offers 2mg of iron per serving actually contains no more iron than two slices of unfortified wholemeal bread and the bread is much less likely to be high in fat.

One health claim that has been officially sanctioned is the link between wholegrain and heart health. Manufacturers of products that contain at least 50 per cent whole grain by weight are allowed to label their products with a statement such as “whole grains can help keep the heart healthy as part of a balanced diet”. However, the phrase “contains wholegrain” now appears on a wide range of cereals – some of which, inevitably, are also high in ingredients that are anything but good for the heart.

MORE SUGAR THAN A JAM DOUGHNUT

The Advertising Standards Authority, when it upheld a claim against a campaign for Frosties, noted that a bowl of the product with 125ml of milk contained more sugar than a jam doughnut. It

appears that this is not unusual; the situation has become so bad that consumer magazine *Which?* has singled out breakfast cereals as the target of a campaign against the misleading promotion of high fat, salt and sugar HFSS foods. There are particular concerns about the targeting of these products at children, as successive studies have shown that children’s cereals tend to be amongst the highest in added sugar.

One of the most heavily criticised innovations is the biscuit straw, advertised by its two main manufacturers, Kellogg’s and Nestlé, as a way of encouraging children to drink milk. The straws, made from a wheat biscuit coated in chocolate, have been described in terms of their sugar content as the equivalent of a KitKat, something few parents would choose to give their children for breakfast.

Cereals aimed at adults can also be unexpectedly sweet. Some dried fruit mueslis are sweetened twice, once in the oats and a second time in the preserved fruits. Others, especially plain bran cereals, can contain high levels of salt. This is particularly worrying when the products are being sold on the basis of their health credentials as a good source of fibre.

BRAND NAME	ENERGY	PROTEIN	FIBRE	CARBOHYDRATES	SUGARS	FAT	SATURATED FAT	SALT	GOOD NUTRITION GUIDE SCORE	Company group
JORDANS ORIGINAL CRUNCHY TROPICAL FRUITS	423	8.1	6.7	65.1	26.3	14.5	5.1	0.0	37.5	Jordans Cereals
KELLOGG'S FRUIT 'N FIBRE	358	8	10	68	23.0	6.0	3.5	1.4	37.5	Kellogg's
KELLOGG'S ALL BRAN ORIGINAL	280	14	27	48	17.0	3.5	0.7	1.6	37.5	Kellogg's
KELLOGG'S COCO POPS	387	5	2	85	36.0	3.0	1.5	1.2	62.5	Kellogg's
KELLOGG'S CORN FLAKES	372	7	3	84	8.0	0.9	0.2	1.8	62.5	Kellogg's
KELLOGG'S CRUNCHY NUT	397	6	2.5	82	35.0	5.0	0.9	1.2	50.0	Kellogg's
KELLOGG'S FROSTIES	371	4.5	2	87	37.0	0.6	0.1	0.2	75.0	Kellogg's
KELLOGG'S RICE CRISPIES	381	6	1	87	10.0	1.0	0.2	1.7	62.5	Kellogg's
NESTLE CHEERIOS	368	8.1	6.5	75.1	21.6	3.9	1.1	1.2	50.0	Nestle
NESTLE CINNAMON GRAHAMS	411	4.7	4.2	76.1	34.2	9.8	3.7	1.8	25.0	Nestle
NESTLE HONEY NUT CHEERIOS	374	6.9	5.1	78.2	35.4	3.7	0.9	1.1	50.0	Nestle
NESTLE SHREDDIES	351	9.9	9.8	73.5	15.5	1.9	0.4	1.0	62.5	Nestle
NESTLE SHREDDED WHEAT	340	11.6	11.8	67.8	0.9	2.5	0.5	0.0	100.0	Nestle
SUGAR PUFFS	379	5.3	3.7	85.8	35.0	1.6	0.2	0.0	75.0	Quaker Oats
QUAKER OATS	356	11	9	60	1.1	8.0	1.5	0.0	87.5	Quaker Oats
ALPEN RAISON, HAZELNUTS & ALMONDS	359	10.5	7.3	66.6	21.8	5.8	0.7	0.4	50.0	Weetabix
READY BREK	358	11.8	7.9	58.9	1.0	8.7	1.2	0.0	87.5	Weetabix
WEETABIX	338	11.5	10	68.4	4.4	2.0	0.6	0.7	87.5	Weetabix

Key

ALL NUMBERS QUOTED ARE PER (per 100g)

Source: The Ethical Company Organisation

THE GOOD NUTRITION GUIDE RECOMMENDS

LOWEST IN SUGARS:
Shredded Wheat

LOWEST IN SATURATED FATS:
Frosties

LOWEST IN SALT:
Jordans Crunchy Tropical Fruits;
Shredded Wheat; Sugar Puffs;
Quaker Oats; Ready Brek

THE GOOD NUTRITION GUIDE
BEST CHOICE:
Shredded Wheat

THE GOOD NUTRITION GUIDE
WORST CHOICE:
Nestle Cinnamon Grahams

OUR RESEARCH RESULTS

The most striking aspect of the Breakfast Cereals table is the diversity of results on offer. In each of the four categories there is an almost haphazard selection of red, amber and green lights, with high sugars, fats and salt jostling for space with their exact opposites sometimes in the same column. Frosties, for instance, have been the subject of much criticism for their high sugar content, but also have the lowest saturated fats of any cereal in the

table including “heart healthy” products such as oats and wheat. This, amongst other surprises, suggests that cereals is one product category in which every single result counts.

As expected, the majority of the cereals surveyed receive a red light for sugar, with Kellogg’s Frosties and Coco Pops leading the table at 37 and 36g per 100g respectively. By way of comparison, 100g of Green & Black’s 70 dark chocolate contains only 29.4g of sugars. Unlike chocolate, however, both of these products are relatively low in fat. By far the fattiest product on offer is Jordans Original Crunchy Tropical Fruits, with 14.5g per 100g. Jordans is also the only product in the table to get a red light for saturates. It does, however, contain just a trace of salt. Kellogg’s Corn Flakes and Nestlé Cinnamon Grahams, on the other hand, have 1.8g of salt per 100g. But as the sole cereal with four green lights, Nestlé Shredded Wheat has the top score.