

## Let Grains Love You Back

By: Ashley Reynolds, MS, RD, Mullen

According to the CDC, one person in America has a stroke or heart attack every 25 seconds. That's a whopping 1.26 million people affected by these scary events each year, which doesn't include the millions living with heart disease and high blood pressure every day.

February is American Heart Month and the perfect time to think about lifestyle changes that can protect your ticker. On the whole, heart disease is a 'lifestyle disease,' meaning there are steps we can all take to reduce our risk for developing it. These include smoking cessation and increasing physical activity as well as dietary improvements like decreasing saturated fat intake, consuming alcohol in moderation and eating lots of fruits and vegetables. Increasing your consumption of whole grains is another important component of a heart-healthy diet.

There are many whole grain choices to suit anyone's tastes- popular options include whole wheat (such as bread, bagels, crackers, tortillas and pasta) barley, brown rice, quinoa, bulgur, millet, wheat berry, whole rye and oatmeal. If a food label states that the package contains whole grain, the "whole grain" part of the food inside the package is required to have virtually the same proportions of bran, germ and endosperm as the harvested kernel does before it is milled.

Findings from a number of scientific studies support the beneficial role whole grains play in heart health.

- A study published in the October issue of American Journal of Clinical Nutrition showed that consuming three servings of whole-grain foods daily led to a significant decrease in blood pressure among middle-aged adults. Because high blood pressure is a significant risk factor for heart disease, reducing blood pressure with the help of whole grains can lead to a longer, healthier life.
- An article from the research journal Circulation last May reported that a diet rich in whole grains and bran may lower the risk of overall death and death from heart disease in women with diabetes. Bran intake was specifically associated with a lower risk of death from heart disease, even after accounting for known risk factors like physical activity and tobacco use.
- Enriched grains may have their own role in heart health. A study from the January issue of American Journal of Clinical Nutrition links the folic acid found in enriched grains to a healthy heart. Compared to much larger amounts, the amount of folic acid currently added to enriched grains such as white bread, pasta, cereal and tortillas was found to be optimal for lowering homocysteine levels. Homocysteine is an amino acid found in your body and some research suggests that higher homocysteine levels can actually increase the risk of heart disease.

It's clear that whole grains really do love you back but unfortunately, Americans are enjoying far too few of them. While USDA's MyPyramid recommends that people consume three one-ounce servings of whole grains daily for a healthy diet, several surveys, including data from the Journal of the American Dietetic Association, indicate that most American adults and children are only including one serving or less of whole grains each day. In fact, the Dietary Guidelines for Americans Committee found that 95% of Americans are not getting their recommended three daily servings of whole grains.

So, what are you waiting for? This American Heart Month, share the love! With so many delicious choices, start thinking of the ways you can incorporate more whole grains into loved ones' daily diets (as well as your own). Here's one recipe to get you started.

### Whole Grain Toast Triangles with Hummus

8 slices 100% whole wheat bread  
1 tablespoon sesame seed  
1 can (15 oz) chickpeas or garbanzo beans, rinsed and drained  
2 tablespoons lemon juice  
2 cloves garlic, minced  
1/4 cup water

**Instructions:**

Heat an 8-inch nonstick skillet over medium heat. Add the sesame seeds. Cook and stir for 1 min or until they're toasted. Remove the skillet from the heat. -- Place the chickpeas, lemon juice, garlic and sesame seeds into a food processor. Cover and process until the mixture is smooth, adding the water, 1 tablespoon at a time, until desired consistency. -- Cut the bread slices into triangles. Serve with the hummus. Makes 8 servings.

Nutrition Facts per serving: 150 calories, 2 grams fat, 0 grams saturated fat, 25 grams carbohydrate, 5 grams fiber, 7 grams protein

*Recipe courtesy of Pepperidge Farm.*