

Healthy Cereals for Kids

Health experts are urging parents to become "cereal killers" for the sake of their children's health.

Kids' cereals are less nutritious than cereals for adults

Ready-to-eat breakfast cereals marketed to children often have more fat and sugar and less fiber and nutritional value than cereals marketed to adults, according to a study that appeared in the Journal of the American Dietetic Association. In fact, the study reports that the cereals most aggressively marketed to kids have the worse nutritional quality.

Breakfast cereal is good for kids—if it's nutritious

Nutritional experts extol the value of breakfast cereals. According to studies, children who eat cereal every day are least likely to be overweight and more likely to have a better nutritional intake than those who do not eat breakfast; they are also more likely to perform better in school throughout the day. One serving of a nutritional cereal can supply as much as half the daily requirements for fifteen of the top vitamins and minerals. Adding nonfat milk to the cereal boosts the nutritional content even higher.

Few children's cereals live up to health claims

Many of the cereals in the study failed to live up to the health claims they made. Researchers analyzed 161 brands of cereal—almost half of them marketed specifically for children—and found:

- Health claims made for kids' cereals were often misleading. Cereals sold as "low fat" or "low sugar" were not lower in calories, as parents might assume.
- While brands labeled "whole grain" did have more fiber, they had just as much salt, sugar and fat as other brands, as well as the same calorie content.
- Children's cereals had more sugar, sodium, carbohydrate and calories per gram than non-children's cereals, and less protein and fiber.
- Sugar accounted for more than one-third of the weight of children's cereals, on average, compared to less than one-quarter of the adult cereals.

Tips for choosing healthy cereals for kids

Researchers suggest reading labels and choosing cereals for the content of the box, not the glitzy advertising campaigns that accompany them.

When choosing a cereal for your child, avoid those that:

- Contain more than 4 or 5 grams of sugar per serving (about one teaspoon).
- Have the following ingredients high on the list: sugar, brown sugar, molasses, corn syrup, organic cane juice, evaporated cane juice, high fructose corn syrup, and malt syrup
- Contain more than 3 grams of fat per serving
- Contains hydrogenated oils, dyes, artificial colors and chemical preservatives

Instead, choose cereals that:

- Have at least 4 grams of fiber per serving.
- Are vitamin and mineral fortified, with at least 25 percent of the RDA for each.

Weaning your child off sugary cereals

If your child has already gotten used to the "sweet stuff," wean him off by mixing his sugary ready-to-eat cereal with a healthy cereal.

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Date: May 2008