

- Breakfasts

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ARE BREAKFAST CEREALS ACTUALLY HEALTHY?

Some breakfast cereals deliver little more than a big dose of sugar while others can also provide some valuable nutrients, partly thanks to manufacturers fortifying the products.

In many families, breakfast cereals play a key role in keeping hungry teenagers happy. One European study found that adolescents eating 'ready-to-eat' cereal daily were less likely to be overweight and had a 'more favourable' intake of B vitamins, vitamin D, calcium, phosphorus and potassium than cereal avoiders. Meanwhile, a UK study of children aged 4–18 found 'high consumers' of breakfast cereals had healthier levels of folate, B vitamins and cholesterol.

There are plenty of studies showing the importance of eating breakfast, although there are almost as many on the benefits of intermittent fasting, with people opting to skip breakfast. One school-based trial on adolescents – part-funded by Kellogg's – found that eating breakfast cereal had a 'positive effect' on cognitive function compared with not eating. Meanwhile, a Swedish review concluded that breakfast also improves quality of life and wellbeing.

Some breakfast cereals could be described as ultra-processed, especially those produced using extrusion, which forces a high-temperature grain mush through a machine under pressure. This can improve the digestibility of grains, but also lead to nutrient losses. However, manufacturers frequently add B vitamins, vitamin D, iron, and folate to cereals. Adding milk to cereal also boosts nutrient levels.

The main concern with breakfast cereals is sugar content. Research has shown that cereals aimed at children contain significantly more sugar and less fibre and protein than those with less targeted marketing. Cereals high in sugar and low in fibre have a high glycaemic index, giving a quick energy spike that soon drops away.

In general, oat-based cereals are healthier. Oats contain a soluble fibre called beta glucan, which can help to lower cholesterol levels. The UK government advises schools that porridge is a "great breakfast food". Second come fortified cereals with higher fibre content and low-to-medium sugar levels. The British Heart Foundation lists porridge as its top choice for a heart-healthy breakfast, but ranks granola below sugar-frosted corn flakes due to high sugar and fat content. Muesli with no added sugar is a healthier option, it says.

One review study found that those with the highest oat intake were less likely to develop type 2 diabetes compared with those on lowest oats levels. But finely ground oat flours in breakfast cereals as well as instant porridges don't have the same health benefits as they're more rapidly digested, causing sugar levels to surge. **ED**

