

Food for thought – oat cuisine

When I've talked to families and busy Mums about the importance of eating breakfast, particularly before school, I'm often asked what makes a good breakfast. As with any meal, it should comprise balanced amounts of carbohydrate, fruit / vegetables, protein and fat. There are many options available to fulfil those criteria however one of the simplest, and most nutritious, is porridge.

Porridge, and oat-based muesli, contains something called oat beta-glucan which is a soluble form of fibre. This fibre dissolves in our intestine and plays an important role in reducing the digestion and absorption of cholesterol in the gut. Scientific studies have shown that a daily portion of oats, such as porridge, can lower blood cholesterol levels after just a few weeks.

Unless you know that you have high cholesterol levels, you are unlikely to want to eat oats just for this reason, but the beta-glucans also play a role in supporting your immune system, so that's an additional benefit. You may already be a porridge convert; if so, you will know that a bowl of porridge 'fills you up' for quite a while.

Oats are available in a number of different forms. Each whole grain form contains the same nutrients but there are differences in the cooking time and the GI (glycaemic index) of the resulting porridge. Rolled oats are made by rolling the whole grain, they are processed the least amount and take longest to cook. Flaked oats are smaller and rolled more thinly, while 'instant' oats are cut into smaller pieces and rolled even thinner to enable them to cook most quickly. The larger the oat flake, the slower they are to be digested and hence the lower their GI (and the longer they help you to feel full).

Unless you are a vegetarian, you may not think of a grain as being a source of protein. A bowl of porridge alone will provide you with at least 10% of daily protein requirements (30% daily protein if made with milk rather than water) whilst remaining a low fat meal that also contains significant amounts of iron. Porridge made with milk also contains additional calcium and can amount to almost half the daily requirement of calcium.

Porridge, however, is what you make of it. You can add fruit, nuts and seeds to increase the carbohydrate (energy), protein and unsaturated ('healthy') fat, plus honey, syrup or spices for flavour. Fresh or dried fruit will also contribute to your '5 a day'.

Traditional porridge, or good quality muesli, is not highly processed. In addition to the oat beta-glucan fibre, it contains significant amounts of vitamins, minerals and antioxidants. Beware, however, of convenience porridge as some varieties contain

large amounts of sugar within a highly processed cereal form, making them relatively high GI.

Don't forget that oats are not just for breakfast. They are a major ingredient of the flapjacks that we know and love as a high-energy snack. Oats can also be used in baking, alongside or instead of wheat-based flour. A quick search on the net will locate recipes for oat muffins, bread, crumble and cookies.



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