

Make (at least!) Half Your Grains Whole
Alexandria, VA, April 20-22, 2009
Conference Report

The Whole Grains Council (WGC) annual conference took place in Alexandria, VA on April 20-22, 2009. The three-day event was divided into four main themes with presentations given for each. Following is a summary provided by the WGC. Additional information about the conference may be found at www.wholegrainscouncil.org.

Theme: Are we there yet?

In this section, speakers presented information on whole grain consumption trends, recent health research, media coverage, supermarket stocking and prices, and chain restaurant offerings to understand where America stands in relation to the 2005 Dietary Guidelines' recommendation to "make at least half your grains whole."

Consumption

Whole grain consumption rose 20% from 2005 to 2008, after staying steady from 1998 to 2005. Despite this rise, Americans still eat only 11% of their grains as whole grains – in contrast to the recommended 50% or more. Children age 2 to 17 still eat the fewest whole grains (9% of total grains as whole grains). Adults age 18 to 34 increased consumption the most from 2005 to 2008 with a 38% rise. (Source: The NPD Group National Eating Trends survey, February 2008)

Research

Recent research (both interventions and epidemiological data) continue to support probable benefits of whole grains in reducing the risk of hypertension, metabolic syndrome, type 2 diabetes, certain cancers, and cardiovascular disease, while also promoting satiety and weight control. In her presentation, Dr. Julie Jones discussed confounding factors that may account for some studies that don't fit the overall pattern of other whole grain research, and raised the question of whether Randomized Clinical Trials are possible or even desirable in nutrition research. She ended with the consensus statement from the recent international whole grain research summit in Newcastle, UK which stated: "There is sufficient evidence showing

that higher whole grain diets compared to refined grain diets are beneficial for several health outcomes. High bran/fibre diets are not equal to whole grain diets but also have a beneficial relationship with health.”

Media

In a pilot survey of ten major women’s and cooking magazines, the WGC found that none of these publications “make at least half their grains whole.” The top four magazines – *Woman’s Day*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Parents and O*, *the Oprah Magazine* – featured whole grains in articles, photos and recipes about one-third of the time that grains were mentioned. The WGC plans to continue this Media Whole Grains Yardstick Project in the coming year, examining additional publications.

Supermarkets

The WGC logged all grain-food SKUs in a representative supermarket, to see whether at least half the grains were whole. WGC representatives found that whole grain penetration varied widely by category, from a low of 6% of the crackers being whole grain to a high of 80% of hot cereals being whole grain. Other popular categories were pasta (22% whole grain), bread (40% whole grain) and cold cereal (68% whole grain). Prices of whole and refined grains were compared. While the price gap varied by category, it was found that the median differential was minimal in most categories – in part because high-priced premium imports and gluten-free products were often included in the refined group. When the *lowest* price in each category was compared, there seemed to be a much larger gap between refined and whole grains, often because generic store brands were available for refined grains and not for whole grains. Two other speakers helped explain why whole grain products have not yet reached penetration or price parity. Dr. Jon Faubion (Kansas State) explained the challenges manufacturers face in reformulating product to make them from whole grains instead of refined, and Dr. Lisa Mancino (USDA) detailed research on the effects of price and availability on consumption.

Restaurants

The WGC surveyed as many as possible of the top 100 chain restaurants in the U.S. and found that 11 of the top 30 chains now offer at least one whole grain option.

Theme: How to Successfully Promote Whole Grains

To help conference attendees more successfully promote whole grains, this section of the conference focused on insights into consumers' perceptions (and misperceptions) of whole grains and their motivations for buying healthy foods overall; the potential of social media tools for delivering promotions and health messages; and case studies of successful whole grain promotions.

Consumer perceptions and motivations

Based on questions received by the WGC from consumers, there is widespread confusion about what foods really qualify as whole grains with whole grain foods such as groats, oats, whole wheat flour and popcorn doubted by some – and non-whole grain foods such as sesame, flax seeds and hemp seeds, etc. championed by others for inclusion in the category. There is also widespread belief that fiber and whole grain are the same thing. WGC staffer Kara Berrini offered suggestions on how manufacturers can more clearly label foods and communicate with consumers, and how the WGC can help. Gary Silvers of Rodale gave context to consumers' buying decisions with data from *Prevention's 2009 Shopping for Health* survey. According to Silvers, taste still trumps all other factors, including cost, though organic sales (never strong beyond fruits and vegetables) have lost ground in the current economy.

Social media

With newspapers going bankrupt right and left, magazine content dwindling and network TV losing market share to cable and niche channels, social media like Twitter, Facebook and interactive websites offer new ways to reach consumers with marketing messages. Social media is “word of mouth marketing on steroids” according to Rob Birgfeld of *SmartBrief*, who reviewed more than a dozen case studies of successful social media promotional campaigns.

Whole grain promotion studies

Successful whole grain promotions have many common elements including:

- They involve whole families and/or whole communities.
- They help people re-connect with cooking and baking.
- They include education about the health benefits of whole grains.
- They make whole grains more available and easier to identify.

Theme: Schools Steer a New Generation to Whole Grains

While schools provide fewer than 20% of the meals kids eat, their potential for educating a new generation about healthy eating is enormous. In this section, school food experts explained how the best schools have replaced mystery meat with whole grains and other healthy foods – and told us how manufacturers can help schools achieve their goals.

Creative school programs

The most successful programs for bringing whole grains and other health foods to schools:

- allow kids to sample whole grain foods risk-free;
- educate kids about the health benefits of whole grains in creative ways including activities, games and through cartoon character “spokespeople;”
- tailor educational programs to meet state-specific requirements for science, language arts, math and other subjects so that teachers can “justify” the time they take;
- support foodservice personnel with details on whole grain commodity foods;
- improve students’ health and academic achievement; and
- involve parents and the community in educational efforts.

What schools want us to know

Schools can’t do it all alone. Government needs to help with better reimbursement rates, and manufacturers need to offer whole grains that kids will enjoy and at a price that’s as close as possible to that of refined grains. A representative from the School Nutrition Association also explained cost factors and reimbursement rates.

Theme: Harmonizing Whole Grain Definitions

In this post-conference workshop, government employees from USDA and HHS (including FDA) joined conference attendees to examine whole grain standards and definitions. After reviewing the many existing (and often conflicting) standards, the workshop participants divided into five groups to discuss these questions:

- What characterizes a fair standard for “whole grain food”?
- What needs to change or happen so that you can do your part to increase whole grain consumption?

At the end of the break-out discussion, a consensus ballot was circulated and was signed by about half of those present at the workshop.

Consensus ballot

Participants were asked to register their agreement with any or all of the following points:

- I support a fair, consistent, and uniform definition of “a whole grain food.” – 100% supported this statement
- Such a standard definition should guarantee a minimum whole grain content that is widely agreed to be “significant.” – 94.7% supported this statement
- Such a standard definition should provide a level playing field for all foods, regardless of moisture content. – 84.2% agreed with this statement
- Such a standard definition should support “transitional foods” that help consumers make incremental, positive changes in their eating habits. – 73.7% agreed with this statement.

Group discussions elaborated on these statements, with some suggesting that 51% of dry ingredient weight as the minimum, and others suggesting 51% of the grain plus some gram-minimum, or the first ingredient (excepting water) should be whole grain.

What needs to change/happen

The breakout groups suggested several ways that government policymakers and manufacturers could help clear the way for increased whole grain consumption including:

- [government] Set a clear “daily value” for whole grain.
- [government] Encourage packaging that says “Product ___ provides ___% of daily value.”

- [government] Eliminate the confusing term, “ounce equivalent.”
- [government] Allow more flexibility on package sizes in WIC.
- [manufacturers] Develop more whole grain products, with different levels of whole grain content, to help people transition to whole grains smoothly.
- [manufacturers] Equalize the price of whole grains vs. refined grains.
- [all] Continue to have discussions like these, and include consumers.

For more information about this conference, visit
www.wholegrainscouncil.org