

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

April 1, 2018

“Bread, Health and a Slice of Confusion”

For decades, we have heard that whole grain bread is healthier than white bread. But, is this true? A new study reveals that there is no difference between the health effects of “wholesome” and white bread. Bread occupies a unique place in our diet: it accounts for about one-tenth of the calories many people in the West consume and up to 40% of the caloric consumption in some non-Western countries – more than any other food product. In the past few decades, since white bread has acquired a bad name, bakeries have been going out of their way to produce high-quality whole grain breads. But, a new study conducted at the Weizmann Institute of Science and published recently in the journal *Cell Metabolism* reveals that these “wholesome” choices are not necessarily the healthiest for everyone. Tests revealed that eating bread of any kind affected the blood levels of sugar, minerals, liver enzymes and other substances. But when the scientists compared the effects of the two types of bread, they were surprised. “We were sure that the sourdough bread would come out a healthier choice, but much to our surprise, we found no difference between the health effects of the two types of bread,” said Prof. Eran Segal of Weizmann Institute’s Computer Science and Applied Mathematics Department. About half of the participants had higher blood sugar levels after eating white bread, whereas the other half had higher blood sugar after eating sourdough bread. It is possible that these different responses were due, in part, to the differences in the individuals’ intestinal microbes – the microbiome. Also, Cochrane Library studies have found that experiments testing the heart benefits of whole grains have been too small, too brief, or both, making it impossible to determine how these foods might lead to long-term heart benefits in the general population. Researchers, who analyzed only randomized controlled trials (RCTs), selected some healthy adults to consume lots of whole grains from products like cereal, rice and oats - and other healthy individuals to eat plenty of refined grains like white bread or stick to their usual diets. All of the experiments did assess how consuming whole grains impacts risk factors for heart disease like blood pressure and cholesterol, however, and “none found a difference in these risk factors based on what types of grains people ate. Still, there are suggestions that fiber makes a small contribution to altering risk factors for heart disease.

In the America that I love, scientists haven’t yet proved beyond a doubt that a diet rich in whole grains is healthy for the heart. So, enjoy your bread but do so in moderation. Eat a well-balanced diet and include fruits and vegetables.

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