A steaming bowl of hot oatmeal provides a delicious and healthy start to a new day. Eating oats may help protect us against a variety of health problems, including heart disease and obesity.

The United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) MyPyramid suggests that most of us should eat six (one ounce) equivalents of grains each day and that we make three of those six servings a whole grain. Grains are a primary source of carbohydrates, the nutrient needed to supply fuel to the body. Whole grains contain phytochemicals, vitamins and minerals, and they are a significant source of both insoluble and soluble fiber. We need both kinds of fiber.

For most adults eating the recommended amount of fiber is a struggle. However, the health benefits of consuming adequate fiber make it worth the effort. The 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends we eat about 14 grams of dietary fiber for every 1000 calories consumed. For most of us that is between 20 to 35 grams. However the average intake of fiber for Americans is only 14 to 15 grams per day.

**Oatmeal to the rescue!**
It just so happens that January is National Oatmeal Month and the perfect time to celebrate whole grain consumption with the cereal that our mothers told us was good for us. A 1/2 cup of oatmeal counts as a one ounce portion from the grain group. More oatmeal is sold and eaten in January that in any other month of the year.

What makes oats so healthy? Oats are a whole grain food containing both insoluble and soluble fiber. Insoluble fiber keeps us regular by moving foods through the digestive system. Soluble fiber has been shown to reduce blood cholesterol levels, particularly the LDL or “bad” cholesterol. As soluble fiber moves through the gut it collects cholesterol and forms a gel. This interferes with the absorption or metabolism of cholesterol helping to lower blood cholesterol levels. Julie Garden-Robinson, Food and Nutrition Specialist with North Dakota State University Extension Service, states that “scientists have compared oats to tiny sponges that pick up cholesterol and carry it out of the body.” The soluble fiber in oatmeal may also play a part in reducing blood pressure. And, since a bowl of oatmeal keeps us feeling fuller longer, this leads to less snacking between meals thereby helping to protect against overweight.

Oatmeal is so good for us that it was the first whole food the Food and Drug Administration allowed to include a health claim on the label. The claim states “Diets low in saturated fat and cholesterol that include soluble fiber from oatmeal may reduce the risk of heart disease.”

Add more nutrients to your bowl of oatmeal when cooking by using fat free or low fat milk instead of water. Follow the same directions as with water, just use milk instead. Spice up your bowl of oatmeal with cinnamon, nutmeg, allspice or cloves. Cinnamon adds sweetness and possibly healthy benefits and no calories! Mix in applesauce or top oatmeal with antioxidant rich berries, either fresh or frozen, dried fruit, raisins or cranberries, or nuts, like walnuts or slivered almonds.

Do you know about the different types of oatmeal?
- **Instant** oatmeal may have salt added to it, so check the “Nutrition Facts” label.
- **Quick or quick-cooking** oatmeal may take slightly longer to cook than the instant product. It usually does not contain salt — but check the label.
- **Old-fashioned** oats take longer to cook than the other two varieties and are usually made without salt.

For a change of pace, try this tasty breakfast treat!

**Fruity Oatmeal**
2/3 cup water
2/3 cup low-fat milk (1 percent)
1/2 teaspoon cinnamon
1/4 teaspoon salt (optional)
1/2 small apple, washed and chopped
1/2 cup rolled oats (not quick-cooking)
3 tablespoons oat bran
1 tablespoon brown sugar
1 small (or 1/2 medium or large) banana

Bring milk and water almost to a boil. Add cinnamon, (salt), apple, rolled oats, and oat bran. Cook uncovered about 5 minutes until liquid is mostly absorbed. Add brown sugar and sliced banana.
Makes two servings.

Each serving provides approximately:

Calories: 235
Fat: 3 g
Dietary Fiber: 6 g

For more information about fiber contact the office as listed below and ask for the University of Florida- IFAS publications Facts about Fiber and Nutrition for Health and Nutrition and Fitness: Fiber in Your Diet.