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.

USDA’s MyPyramid suggests that most of us should eat six (one ounce) equivalents of grains each day and recommends we make three of those six servings 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. Most of us should be consuming between 20 and 35 grams of fiber each day according to the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans. 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 grains with the cereal that our mothers told us was good for us. More oatmeal is sold and eaten in January than in any other month of the year. A 1/2 cup of oatmeal counts as a one-ounce portion from the grain group.

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 digestive system, 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.

When cooking add more nutrients to your bowl of oatmeal 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!

**Banana Split Oatmeal**

Serving Size: 1  
Yield: 1 serving  
1/3 cup dry oatmeal, quick-cooking  
1/8 teaspoon salt  
3/4 cup very hot water or fat-free milk  
1/2 sliced banana  
1/2 cup frozen yogurt, non-fat  

1. In a microwave safe cereal bowl, mix together the oatmeal and salt. Stir in water.
2. Microwave on high power for 1 minute. Stir. Microwave on high power for another minute. Stir again.
3. Microwave an additional 30-60 seconds on high power until the cereal reaches the desired thickness. Stir again.
4. Top with banana slices and frozen yogurt.

**TIP:** The banana split oatmeal can also be a snack by itself.

Sources:

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http://recipefinder.nal.usda.gov/?mode=display&rec_id=9, Adapted from:Recipe Collection, p.14 University of Nebraska-Lincoln Cooperative Extension  

If you have a question, write to Jo Shuford-Law, Extension Agent Family and Consumer Sciences, University of Florida/IFAS Extension--Leon County, 615 Paul Russell Road, Tallahassee, FL 32301-7099; or call the Extension Office 487-3006, between 8 a.m. to noon or 1 to 5 p.m. weekdays.

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