Breakfast Bars vs. Cereal

By ACSH Staff — April 4, 2002

Who has time to eat breakfast anymore?

With a growing number of dual-income families and single-parent households, morning often entails synchronizing bathroom schedules and rushing out the front door rather than eating a leisurely breakfast. The cereal industry is finally beginning to face this fact and, after five years of declining sales, Kellogg’s, General Mills, Post, and Quaker Oats are now producing breakfast convenience foods that can be eaten on the run. Although we know it's easier to eat a cereal bar on the road than it is to struggle with a bowl and spoon on the dashboard, the question remains: How does it compare nutritionally? We compared three such breakfast bars to their cereal counterparts.

General Mills has three varieties of Milk ’n Cereal bars out on the market Honey Nut Cheerios, Cinnamon Toast Crunch, and Chex which they are promoting as having "the nutrition of a bowl of cereal with milk." Greg Zimprich, a public relations manager for General Mills cereals, commented: "It's hitting on the fundamentals of convenience, taste, and nutrition. If you can get those three things, that's what consumers want." The statement "the vitamin, mineral, and protein nutrition of one cereal serving plus 1/2 cup milk" follows the nutritional label on the box. Therefore, we compared the cereal bars to a serving of cereal and 1/2 cup of milk.

A single-serving Honey Nut Cheerios bar has 160 calories, 4 grams of fat, and 1.5 grams of saturated fat. It contains 1 gram of dietary fiber, 6 grams of protein, and 250 milligrams of calcium (19% of the daily requirement of calcium for, let's say, an adolescent female). This cannot be labeled as a low-fat food because the Food and Drug Administration only allows food products that have 3 grams of fat or less to make such claims.

The caloric content of a bowl of Honey Nut Cheerios (1 cup serving) with 1/2 cup of skim milk is about the same as that of the bars. The bowl has 2 grams less fat than the bars and 1 gram less saturated fat.

The dietary fiber of the bowl serving is 2 grams and the protein is over 7 grams, both greater than that found in the bars.

However, the bar wins in the calcium department: 250 milligrams. The bowl of cereal with milk provided only 150 grams of calcium less than 12% of the daily requirement for a teenage girl.

The Cinnamon Toast Crunch bars were also found to be comparable to a bowl of the cereal (3/4 cup serving of cereal with 1/2 cup milk). The bowl serving contained 10 fewer calories than the bars and a little less fat and saturated fat, but once more the bowl came up short in the calcium competition, with 60 milligrams less calcium than that found in the bars.
Finally, a bowl of Chex cereal (1 cup serving of cereal with 1/2 cup of skim milk) provided 10 less calories than the cereal bars, nearly 4 grams less fat, 1.5 grams less saturated fat, and 100 milligrams less calcium than the bars.

The differences revealed by our comparison were for the most part negligible. Eating a General Mills cereal bar is about the same nutritionally as eating a bowl of cereal. However, if you are looking to add a little more calcium to your diet, you might be better off with the cereal bar.

Be aware, though, that if you are watching your fat intake, you might be better off with the bowl of cereal. The cereal bars are not considered a low-fat food by the FDA, and the palm kernel oil that is added to the "real milk filling" has twice the saturated fat of lard, accounting for the higher levels of saturated fat in the bars. For those of you who like a banana in your cereal, it is just as easy to follow up the bar with a piece of fruit as it is to add it to one's bowl. One banana adds 1 gram of protein to the meal, nearly 3 grams of dietary fiber, and additional vitamins and minerals, while tripling the potassium.

While it is a sad state of affairs that we don't always have time to sit down and eat breakfast as a family anymore, we cannot blame the cereal bars for promoting a "meals-on-the-go" lifestyle. Instead, they are simply fulfilling a need, and compared to some of the options out there, they are fairly nutritious. Whether people will feel as satisfied and filled after a bar as after a bowl is another question but is largely subjective. The surest way to fill up is to opt for a more fiber-rich alternative or by adding a piece of fruit to your breakfast routine. As the FDA website notes: "Since the digestive tract can handle only so much bulk at a time, fiber-rich foods are more filling than other foods."

One group of individuals who will most likely disapprove of this breakfast option are dentists, since the bars are considerably stickier than a bowl of cereal (and people are less likely to brush after eating on the run). Dr. Matthew Messina, a practicing dentist and American Dental Association consumer advisor, comments on the ADA website: "it's not necessarily the amount of sugar in the candy or cakes you put in your mouth, it's the consistency of the candy. The stickier things are, like fruit cakes and gummy bears, the less likely they'll be washed out from between the teeth by saliva." To be on the safe side, you may be better off eating a bowl of cereal or keeping a toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste in your desk drawer.

One last comparison that might affect your choice: The bars do cost a bit more per serving nearly 20 cents more than a bowl of cereal with milk.
Very well written article touching the scientific (caloric value) and the social (busy lives, busy families) as well as economic aspects. I wanted to add a brief comment regarding the incorporation of the saturated palm kernel oil into the breakfast bars. True, palm is saturated, but as a food technologist involved in formulating products, I must say the saturated palm is probably a better alternative for a fat source than the "trans" fatty acid-laden, partially hydrogenated vegetable oils. In addition, some fractions of palm oil contain valuable tocopherols and tocotrienols assuming, that is, they have not been "stripped" or oxidized during processing and storage. Thanks for the informative article and the opportunity to comment.

Tom Jones
Kalsec, Inc
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April 15, 2002

Any nutritious food in the morning is better than nothing. This is particularly true when you look at the sad state of some of the lunch menus. What is offered for student lunches is laden with fat and calories: pizza, French fries, hoagies, and a large selection of soda. A breakfast cereal bar can't be all that bad!

SJ Larson
October 23, 2003

Nicely written article. I am a registered dietitian with a daughter who has a tree nut allergy, and when reading the General Mills Milk 'N Cereal Bar labels, I realized that these bars all contain almond meal whereas, in most cases, the original cereal does not. I am also writing to alert the company about the danger they're imposing on families with nut-allergic members. Thanks,

Julie Seed, M.Ed., R.D., L.D.N.