

# Tempest in a Cereal Bowl?

By ACSH Staff — June 28, 2005

*This article originally appeared in [TechCentralStation.com](http://TechCentralStation.com) [1]:*

This week, General Mills announced its intent to launch a national ad campaign which will be targeted at children and tout the health benefits of eating breakfast especially a breakfast of cereal that the company produces. Among the General Mills cereals being promoted to kids are several brands that are pre-sweetened with added sugar.

The ad campaign should have been welcomed--and praised--for the pro-health message it will promote: eating breakfast is important for children. Instead, a parade of churlish nutritionists stepped up to the media microphones and complained that General Mills was acting irresponsibly by urging kids to eat cereal that contains sugar. Not only did these critics specifically target the cereals sugar as a health villain, they went on to suggest that products like Cocoa Puffs contribute to our nation's obesity problem. A number of these nay-sayers actually went so far as to that pre-sweetened cereals were nutritionally worthless or, as food industry critic Marion Nestle put it, "the makers of these cereals have done a fabulous marketing job of making people think that these are healthy foods when these are cookies".

Cookies??!! You have got to be kidding!

Dr. Nestle, did you ever look at a nutrition label on any of these cereal boxes? I recall a New Yorker cartoon I saw many years ago, showing a man studying his cereal box and proclaiming to his wife "Well, now that I have consumed 100% of my daily nutritional requirements, I am going back to bed".

No, you do not get 100% of your RDAs (recommended nutrient intakes) from Trix or any other cereal for that matter. But the nutrition facts are nonetheless impressive. A one cup serving offers 25% of your requirements of folic acid, zinc, iron, niacin, vitamin B-12, riboflavin, and other essentials. When you add milk, you get even more. So what's with this comparison to "cookies"? And you get all this nutrition for only 120 calories --160 with milk. In each serving you get 13 grams of added sugar--which is about 3 teaspoons, containing about 50 calories.

Compare this profile to that of Wheaties, a cereal which is not pre-sweetened and thus, according to the popular wisdom, is healthier. You find about 4 grams of sugar, or one teaspoon, there. But children often find such unsweetened cereals unappealing, are less inclined to eat it, and therefore may eat a less nutritious breakfast. In addition, an unsweetened cereal may encourage children to add their own sugar, bringing unsweetened cereals up to or above the sugar content of cereals like Trix. Yes, the percentage of the RDAs are higher for many nutrients and fiber (50% instead of 25% and 3 grams of fiber versus 1 gram) in Wheaties, but then breakfast represents one of the three or more meals most kids will eat. At the end of the day, the difference between the two

products at breakfast is not significant.

Given the fact that most cereals--presweetened or not--are highly nutritious products, why are individuals who boast nutritional training condemning them? (One nutritionist appearing on the NBC Today program advised parents whose kids pressure them into purchasing sweetened cereal, to discard the contents, give the kids the box and any toy it might contain--and then fill the bowl up with something which is not pre-sweetened).

In essence, this campaign promotes tasty, unarguably nutritious food likely to encourage kids not to skip breakfast. If a little bit of sugar--remember, roughly equivalent to 50 calories--gets kids to eat foods that are nutrient rich that they might otherwise turn their noses up at, why such a negative reaction?

The answer is simple: food and nutrition are highly emotional, and often poorly understood issues. In discussions of food especially as it relates to kids rational assessments and critical thinking are too often abandoned, replaced by closely held but unscientific views. The popular wisdom dictates that sugar is "bad, although there is no evidence that, when used in moderation like other ingredients, it threatens health or makes kids fat. Sugar simply makes nutritious food like cereal taste better to kids.

Kudos to General Mills for launching an advertising campaign stressing the nutritional and health virtues of breakfast --despite the fact that they must have been well aware of the inevitable (and unfounded) criticism they would get for doing so.

UPDATE: See two reactions to this piece [here](#) [2].

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