

SECTION: LEARNING CENTRE

ABOUT OATS

Samuel Johnson's 1755 dictionary defined oats as "A grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland appears to support the people." The Scotsman's retort to this was, "That's why England has such good horses, and Scotland has such fine men!"

Oats (*Avena sativa*) have a sweet flavor that makes them a favorite for breakfast cereals. Unique among the most widely-eaten grains, oats almost never have their bran and germ removed in processing. So if you see oats or oat flour on the label, relax: you're virtually guaranteed to be getting whole grain.

In the U.S., most oats are steamed and flattened to produce rolled oats, sold as "old-fashioned" or regular oats, quick oats, and instant oats. The more oats are flattened and steamed, the quicker they cook – and the softer they become. If you prefer a chewier, nuttier texture, consider steel-cut oats, also sometimes called Irish or Scottish oats. Steel-cut oats consist of the entire oat kernel (similar in look to a grain of rice), sliced once or twice into smaller pieces to help water penetrate and cook the grain. Cooked for about 20-30 minutes, steel-cut oats create a breakfast porridge that delights many people who didn't realize they love oatmeal!

Scientific studies have concluded that oats contain a special kind of fiber called beta-glucan found to be especially effective in lowering cholesterol. Recent research reports indicate that oats also have a unique antioxidant, avenanthramides, that helps protect blood vessels from the damaging effects of LDL cholesterol.

Different Forms of Oats:



Raw Oats, newly harvested

This is what oats look like before the kernels (groats) are separated from the hulls and stalks. Admittedly, you won't see them this way in stores, but we thought you'd like to see what they look like fresh from the fields.



Whole Oat Groats

A groat is another name for a grain kernel. Whole oat groats are the result of simply harvesting oats, cleaning them, and removing their inedible hulls. You can most often find these in health food stores. They take the longest to cook.

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Steel Cut Oats

If you cut groats into two or three pieces with a sharp metal blade, you get steel cut oats. They cook quicker than oat groats, because water can more easily penetrate the smaller pieces. Steel cut oats are also sometimes called Irish oatmeal.



Scottish Oatmeal

Instead of cutting oats with a steel blade, the Scots traditionally stone-grind them, creating broken bits of varying sizes, which some say results in a creamier porridge than steel-cutting.



Rolled Oats – regular (old fashioned)

Rolled oats (sometimes called old fashioned oats) are created when oat groats are steamed and then rolled into flakes. This process stabilizes the healthy oils in the oats, so they stay fresh longer, and helps the oats cook faster, by creating a greater surface area.



Rolled Oats – quick or instant

If you roll the oat flakes thinner, and/or steam them longer, you create quick oats and ultimately instant oats. The nutrition stays the same (these are all whole grains) but the texture changes – a plus for some people and a drawback for others. The good thing about having so many choices is that everyone can get exactly the taste they like best!



Oat Flour

Oat flour is a whole grain flour that can be used in baking, or for thickening soups and stews.

Health Benefits of Oats:

Scores of studies have documented the many health benefits of oats.

- Eating oats helps lower LDL "bad" cholesterol and may help reduce the risk of heart disease.
- Oats help you feel fuller longer, which helps control your weight.
- Oatmeal and oats may help lower blood pressure.
- Oats may help reduce your risk of type 2 diabetes, since their soluble fiber helps control blood sugar.
- Oats help cut the use of laxatives, without the side effects associated with medications.

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- Oats are high in beta-glucans, a kind of starch that stimulates the immune system and inhibits tumors. This may help reduce your risk of some cancers.
- Early introduction of oats in children's diets may help reduce their risk of asthma.
- Oats are higher in protein and healthy fats, and lower in carbohydrates than most other whole grains.
- Oats contain more than 20 unique polyphenols called avenanthramides, which have strong anti-oxidant, anti-inflammatory, and anti-itching activity.

[Click here](#) to learn more details and to reference studies on the health benefits of oats.

Fun Facts about Oats:

- Oatmeal rated #1 among breakfast foods and #3 overall in a “Satiety Index” created by Australian researchers seeking to find foods that make people feel full and satisfied the longest.
- Oats grow best in cooler climates with plenty of rainfall – conditions inhospitable to most grains. This explains why they’re so popular in Scotland and Ireland!
- The inedible hulls of oats can contribute to a healthier planet. In a joint Quaker/University of Iowa project, oat hulls in a biomass boiler provide 14% of the energy at the university, reducing carbon dioxide emissions by 70,000 tons a year – the equivalent of taking 1,200 cars off the road. As of early 2010, the program had saved the university over a million dollars.
- Want to visit Oatmeal, Texas? It’s about 56 miles northwest of Austin – but you’ll have to stop over in nearby Bertram, TX for the annual Oatmeal Festival.
- Oats are used in the food industry as a stabilizer in foods like ice cream.
- Because of their natural anti-itching properties, oats are used in the cosmetic industry for a variety of products. The name Aveeno, for instance, comes from the botanical name avena, for oats.
- Oats were originally considered a nuisance weed, to be pulled up and burned when they appeared in fields of wheat and barley.
- In Britain, a warming and nourishing oatmeal broth drink was traditionally made from oat husks soaked until they soured; it was called “sowans” in Scotland, and “brewis” in Wales.
- Many people consider oatmeal brulée the ultimate porridge: picture a thick bowl of oatmeal topped with a thin layer of caramelized sugar and some fresh berries.
- Russia, Canada, the United States, Finland, and Poland are the world’s leading producers of oats.
- Oats are naturally gluten-free, but may be contaminated with gluten during growing and processing. Look for oats certified gluten-free if you are sensitive to gluten.

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- An 18-ounce package of old fashioned oats contains about 26,000 rolled oats.
- Early attempts to promote oats as a good food for people – not just for horses – prompted editorials and cartoons poking fun at oat-eaters as likely to develop a whinny. Still, only 5% of oats grown worldwide are consumed by humans today.

Source: The Whole Grain Council