

# Natural Choice?

Shelf savvy on granola and cereal bars

by MADELEINE GREERY

When Kelly Porter of Lake Echo, NS, goes grocery shopping with her children, a leisurely look at labels is not exactly in her contingency plan. “I feel lucky if I can read any label at all when we shop,” says the mother of Colin, five, Oliver, three, and Nicola, one.

Understandably, Porter doesn't really know what's inside the granola and cereal bars she buys for her brood, but hopes they are a healthy snack. “That's *why* I buy them,” she says. “I'm under the impression that these bars are a healthy alternative to things that I won't buy for my kids — like chocolate bars and chips.”

Granola sure has staying power. Long after flower power and all things psychedelic faded away in the 1970s, granola is still equated with natural goodness and health. But the nutritional truth is counterintuitive. According to registered dietitian Pat Martz of Edmonton, these bars “are no different than sugar-coated cereal.” They are a “sometimes food” that really should not be a daily addition to your child's lunch box.

Oops! My son has subsisted on daily lunch doses throughout the years. Turns out he's been ingesting some scary fats, not enough fibre and too much sugar all in the name of convenience. Here's why:

## LABEL LOWDOWN

Martz believes in reading food labels and teaches parents in Edmonton how to excel at it. When you're shopping for cereal and granola bars, Martz stresses looking at four critical things: fat, fibre, sugar and serving size.

Crunchy Granola Bars recipe, p. 72



### The Dish on Portions

calories	164
protein	3.3 g
fat	4.9 g
fibre	3.8 g
carbs	29.1 g
iron	11%*
magnesium	10%*
vitamin B <sub>1</sub>	12%*

\*of recommended daily amount

- Before you look at the amount of fat, look at the type. By now, many of us know that we should avoid anything with trans fats. The new Nutrition Facts table (mandatory on most products by December) will list the fatty offender. If there's no panel on what you buy, read the ingredients list and check for the words “hydrogenated” or “shortening.” If you see them, you're seeing trans fats.
- Choose a low-fat bar. That means no more than 2 g of saturated fat per serving.
- While 2 g of fibre is a “source of fibre,” Martz advises going one step further and looking for at least 3 g per bar.
- Martz recommends that kids get only one serving of sugar per bar — that would be 4 g (1 tsp) according to Health Canada. So seek brands with

## The Loophole

According to Health Canada guidelines, manufacturers can make a “0 trans fat” or “trans fat free” claim on packaging if the product has less than 0.2 g trans fat per serving. Parents need to be aware, says Edmonton community dietitian Pat Martz, that they may be consuming the stuff every time they eat a trans-fat-free labelled product. So, you *still* need to check ingredients lists for “hydrogenated” and “shortening” if you want no trans fats. For example, Kellogg's All-Bran states, “trans fat free,” but lists vegetable shortening in the ingredients.

## Crunchy Granola Bars

Here's a nut-free, high-fibre bar that tastes healthy (not decadent) and can be packed for school.

<b>2 cups (500 mL)</b>	<b>low-fat granola</b>
<b>1 cup (250 mL)</b>	<b>rolled oats (old-fashioned or quick cooking, not instant)</b>
<b>1 cup (250 mL)</b>	<b>Kellogg's All-Bran Bran Buds</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>egg whites</b>
<b>½ cup (125 mL)</b>	<b>corn syrup</b>
<b>¼ cup (50 mL)</b>	<b>reduced sugar jam (strawberry or raspberry)*</b>
<b>¼ cup (50 mL)</b>	<b>non-hydrogenated margarine</b>



Preheat oven to 375°F (190°C).

In a large bowl, combine granola, oats, bran buds and egg whites.

Heat corn syrup, jam and margarine in a small pot at medium and bring to a boil. Turn off heat and combine well with whisk.

Pour corn syrup mixture into granola mixture and stir until well combined. Spoon into an oiled 9 in. (23 cm) square pan and flatten evenly with a spatula or potato masher.

Place on the middle rack of the oven and bake 25 to 30 minutes or until golden brown. Allow to cool for 5 minutes, then transfer to a baking rack to cool completely. Slice into slender 4½ x 1¼ in. (11 x 3 cm) bars.

Makes 14 bars.

*\*For less sugar, choose jams labelled "twice the fruit" or "light."*

*Our recipe tester, Adell Shneer, tests our Nutrition column using both imperial and metric measurements. However, proportions in the metric version may differ slightly from the original, causing small variations in the result.*

5 g of sugar or less, says Martz.

### FAT'S FATE

When contacted, all the big players (with the exception of General Mills, makers of Nature Valley), such as President's Choice, Kellogg's and Quaker, were in the midst of reformulating products to remove trans fats. And, to their credit, many had completely trans-fat-free products (some three-quarters of the President's Choice line, for instance). But when we went to press, every manufacturer still had at least one or two bars with trans fats in their product line. Nature Valley Crunchy Granola bars, which have been sold in Canada for 15 years, have never had trans fats (but

their Chewy Trail Mix bars were reformulated to remove trans fats this year). Master Choice has shortening (a.k.a. trans fats) in all of their eight bars, but said that they have "no immediate plans" to reformulate.

### FIBRE FILLED

Sadly, the boxes my kids lunge for in the supermarket are the lowest in fibre: Froot Loops and Frosted Flakes cereal bars have zip. Ditto Special K cereal bar. Newcomer Vital Chewy bars (made by Leclerc in Quebec) are bursting with fibre, a whopping 4 g in all four flavours. Toronto cookbook author and chef Theresa Albert-Ratchford says her 10-year-old daughter, Jameson, loves the apple crisp Vital

Chewy bar. The bar satisfies Jameson's desire to have a cool lunch-box treat like her schoolmates, but keeps her mother happy "because it contains so many healthy ingredients." Other bars with 3 g or more of fibre: all four Nature's Path granola bars, Kellogg's All-Bran bars (two flavours), Health Valley date and almond bar, and three out of four President's Choice low-fat fruit cereal bars.

### SWEET SORROW

Not a single bar reviewed met Martz's strict guideline of 5 g sugar per bar. The average sugar content was around 10 to 12 g per bar. Notable exceptions were Master Choice honey and oats (5.7 g per bar) and Nature Valley (6 g per 23 g bar, but remember, two bars per pouch) and four flavours of Quaker Chewy bars (6 g) from Rocky Road to S'mores. Sweetest in the crowd: Quaker Oatmeal to Go squares with 20 g per 60 g square. That's 5 tsp sugar per serving!

### NUT BAR

Tossing a granola or cereal bar in a packed lunch seems so easy. But bars are out of bounds for daycares or schools with strict no-nut or no-traces-of-nut policies. All of the products reviewed — with the exception of Kellogg's — stated "may contain traces of nuts" or "was manufactured in a facility that uses nuts" or simply contained nuts. According to Kellogg's consumer response line, if a product does not list nuts under ingredients, it is completely nut-free, including traces of nuts.

Chances are that Porter isn't the only parent who doesn't have time to linger over labels. But the grocery store research is clearly worth the effort: On close inspection, so many of these convenient and kid-pleasing bars do lose their granola glow. ♥

Today's Parent  
**com**

Get advice and inspiration for improving your family's eating habits when Madeleine Greey hosts a special forum October 4: [Today'sparent.com/forums](http://Today'sparent.com/forums).