

Pasta Perfect

How to really use your noodles

by MADELEINE GREY

What kid doesn't love pasta? Whether it's slurping on s'ghetti or wolfing down mac and cheese, most mini-diners can't wait to hunker down over a big bowl of noodles. So this handy carb makes for good family noshing.

But what about those carbs? We all know that carbohydrates are out of the closet and have shed that nasty image problem. In other words, a carb can be a kid's best friend, right?

Definitely, says registered dietitian Shefali Raja of Surrey, BC. Carbs are the fuel for healthy children. Without them, kids wouldn't be kids — kicking up a ruckus and running when they could be walking. "Most importantly, the brain really counts on carbs," she says. "They help a child to think clearly or push himself to complete a run."

It sounds pretty straightforward. So what pasta should you pick? Here's the lowdown on some of the familiar faces:

Cut and dried You know the drill. It's made from refined wheat (durum wheat, actually) in a specific grind (called semolina) and water. That's it. Lots of shapes, from macaroni to manicotti, are available but, no matter the design, the nutritional stats are the same: a 1 cup serving has 211 calories, 1.4 g fat, 2.7 g fibre, 9.9 g protein, along with iron, thiamine, riboflavin, niacin and folate. Not bad.

Colour coded Hoping to find more nutrients in green, orange or red pasta? It's true — the colour comes naturally from powdered spinach, tomatoes or beets added during processing. But the nutritional advantage is minimal. Catelli Bistro spinach lasagna and fettuccine is above average, with 2% of



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the daily value of vitamin A and 8% daily value of calcium. (Psst! Better to add half a cup of cooked spinach to the pasta sauce. It has almost twice the vitamin A you need for the day.)

Getting fresh Fresh pasta sold in the refrigerated section is usually made from refined durum semolina flour (exception: Olivieri whole wheat nested linguine), water and eggs. The stats are similar to dried pasta except, due to the egg, it contains cholesterol

and because it has a higher water content, it has (by weight) slightly fewer calories and carbohydrates than dried. Fresh pasta tends to have a silkier, fuller mouth feel and richer taste.

Egg-citing choice Dried egg noodles used in homemade chicken noodle soup or tuna casseroles are on par with pasta, calorie-wise. In a comparison between Catelli egg noodles and Olivieri fresh fettuccine, the cooked egg noodles had more egg, protein and

Portion Sense

Grain products — like pasta — take up the lion's share of the diet proposed by *Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating*. A cup of cooked pasta (it's not that big — try measuring it!) constitutes two servings. An active 13-year-old going through puberty is a contender for four servings of pasta (2 cups) at a sitting, a seven-year-old might be happy with two servings (1 cup) and a toddler, new to pasta, is likely to fill up on one serving. Numbers aside, registered dietitian Shefali Raja says it's important to pay attention to body cues and base servings on how hungry a child is. It's also important to serve more than just pasta. Add some protein and lots of veggies to make the meal more complete.

cholesterol than the fresh pasta. So despite the extra fat, egg noodles are a good option — especially when there's not much other protein in the meal.

Potato pasta? Vacuum-packed gnocchi, sold in supermarkets, are made from rehydrated potato flakes, refined wheat flour and starch. They contain about half the calories of white dried pasta, with less fibre and about one-quarter the protein. Dried white rice noodles have about one-third the calories and fibre found in regular durum pasta, zero fat and almost no protein. If you're opting for rice noodles due to wheat allergies, better to source out brown rice noodles.

ZOOM IN ON WHOLE GRAINS

Raja says the healthiest noodles to choose are fibre-rich, whole-grain pastas. Fibre helps prevent constipation, protect against heart disease and — bonus! — keeps the munchies away. When kids chow down on this complex carb, they “feel fuller for a longer time and won't have the urge to constantly eat,” says Raja.

Making the switch may cause some rumblings in the peanut gallery. Whole-grain pastas have a more robust, chewier flavour, and not every tot will instantly gravitate towards them. Try cooking a mix of whole-grain and white pasta together to start. (Check cooking times on packaging. Whole-grain pastas usually need a minute or more than white, so add them to the pot first.)

Ounce for ounce, whole wheat pasta has about the same calories, fat and protein as regular white pasta, but almost three times the fibre. Why stop at whole wheat? Just like bread, pasta can be made from rye, buckwheat, barley, bran and brown rice. Look for multi-grain pastas to get a variety of nutritional benefits, not to mention good flavour. Rye

Cheesy Lasagna Rolls

Here's a great way to introduce whole wheat pasta, since all that sauce hides its colour from the dinner detectives in your midst. My kids asked about the “green things” and I avoided the S-word calling it “a kind of lettuce.”

12	whole wheat lasagna noodles
4 cups (1 L)	baby spinach leaves, packed
475 g	tub light ricotta cheese
1	omega-3 egg, well beaten
¼ cup (50 mL)	Parmesan cheese
¼ tsp (1 mL)	nutmeg
¼ tsp (1 mL)	freshly ground black pepper
700 mL	jar pasta sauce
1 cup (250 mL)	shredded mozzarella cheese

Preheat the oven to 350°F (180°C).

In a large pot of salted boiling water, cook whole wheat lasagna noodles according to package instructions, stirring occasionally to prevent sticking. Rinse under cold water, making sure none of the sheets are stuck together. Drain.

Wash spinach leaves, drain and with water still clinging to the leaves, place spinach in a medium pot and cook, covered on high for 2 to 3 minutes or until spinach is fully wilted (stir occasionally to prevent scorching). Rinse under cold water. Squeeze out excess water and chop finely.

In a large mixing bowl, combine spinach, ricotta cheese, egg, Parmesan cheese, nutmeg and ground pepper. Combine well.

Cover the bottom of a 9 x 13 in. (3.5 L) baking pan with pasta sauce. Spread 2½ tbsps (32 mL) of ricotta mixture evenly over one lasagna sheet. Roll up and position in bottom of pan. Repeat 11 times. The rolls should fit snugly in the pan. (If necessary, cut the last two sheets in half, crosswise, to create two mini-rolls.) Spoon over remaining sauce. Sprinkle with mozzarella cheese. Bake 40 to 45 minutes or until golden brown and bubbly around the edges.

Makes 4 to 6 servings.

Our recipe tester, Jenny Koniuk, tests Nutrition using both imperial and metric measurements. However, proportions in the metric version may differ slightly from the original, causing small variations in the result.

is especially high in fibre and buckwheat contains not only fibre, but high levels of rutin, a powerful antioxidant that's good for young hearts.

TOPPING IT OFF

Like all its carb brethren, pasta is nutritionally innocent on its lonesome, but can gather up a posse of high-fat nosnos once the toppings are slathered on. Butter, cream, bacon, sausage and cheese are all OK for kids in moderation, but not on a daily basis.

Meanwhile, convenience doesn't

always spell health food. The Lipton Sidekicks Spaghetti Four Cheese package says it's ready in 15 minutes, but it contains trans fats and a long list of hard-to-pronounce ingredients. Consider cooking up some whole wheat spaghetti instead, adding 1 tsp heart-healthy olive oil (40 calories, 4.6 g fat) and 1 tbsps Parmesan (22 calories, 1.5 g fat) to each portion to offer something just as fast and cheap — plus healthier. As they say in Italy, *butta la pasta!* (Throw in the pasta!) ♥

The Shape We're Into

From alphabet to ziti, there are dozens of pasta shapes to choose from, yet according to Catelli, the nation's largest pasta brand, spaghetti holds the key to our stomachs as the longtime top seller.

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