What exactly is a whole grain, and what makes it better for us?

A whole grain is a grain that contains 100% of the original kernel, which includes three parts: the bran, germ, and endosperm. A whole grain contains all of its naturally-occurring parts and nutrients in their original proportions. You’re selecting a whole grain when you buy foods such as oatmeal, popcorn, brown or wild rice, corn, quinoa, barley or rye. Whole grains can also be used to make breads, cereals, pastas, crackers and other baked goods.

Whole grains contain higher amounts of protein, fiber, B-vitamins, vitamin E, iron, magnesium and several other nutrients compared to “white” or “refined grains.” Refined grains are grains that have been significantly modified from their natural state. This usually involves removing the bran and germ of the whole grain and then adding back some of the nutrients that were removed (aka “enriching”). But what you’re left with is only a shadow of its former, nutritious self. After processing it’s a close cousin to a simple sugar.

Notice I put the words “white” in parentheses above. This doesn’t mean that you should avoid white grains and only buy brown grains. The appearance and advertising of whole grains can be very deceiving. You’ve probably walked through the bread aisle at the grocery store and have seen words like “9 grain,” “100% Whole Grain,” “Honey Wheat,” “Whole Wheat,” even “Whole, White Wheat”! Those terms can be very confusing when trying to identify grains that are 100% whole. To be sure a product contains whole grains, check the ingredient list. If the first word on the ingredient list is “enriched” or “fortified,” it’s likely not made with 100% whole grains. The key is to look for the words “whole” as one of the first ingredients. Sometimes foods have a combination of both whole and enriched grains so be sure to read the first few ingredients listed just to be safe.

So now you know how to better identify whole grains and why they’re better for us. If you just can’t give up your white rice or hillbilly bread, don’t sweat it! Choosing 100% whole grains half the time is better than not choosing them at all!