

The Overlooked Whole Grain by the American Institute for Cancer Research

Besides whole wheat bread, Americans are often stumped to name whole grain foods. Oatmeal, another kind, helps lower cholesterol, but can you name any more? Barley, the oldest cultivated grain in the Near East and Europe, is an overlooked choice that should be brought back to the table.

Like oats, barley supplies significant amounts of the soluble fiber called beta-glucans that effectively lowers cholesterol. This soluble fiber also seems to help control blood sugar and reduce high levels of insulin that are a risk factor for diabetes. The insoluble fiber in barley can promote bowel regularity and help lower the risk of colon cancer.

The Different Kinds of Barley

“Hulled” barley is the truly whole-grain form that includes bran, endosperm and germ. This form of barley is usually available only in health food stores, however, and takes about one and one quarter hours to cook.

Fortunately, the fiber and nutrients in barley are spread fairly evenly throughout the grain. Although the common “pearl” barley is not truly a whole grain because it lacks the bran, many nutritionists categorize it as one. Quick or instant barley, which cooks in 10 to 12 minutes, retains a similar nutrient content as regular pearl barley.

Soups, Casseroles and Salads

Barley is a classic ingredient in soup. But try barley instead of rice or pasta in casseroles, too. You can also serve barley as a side dish instead of rice or potatoes. Make a barley pilaf by sautéing barley about five minutes in a little olive oil, then add broth, bring to a cover, reduce heat and simmer until tender. Add some onion or garlic as the barley sautés for extra flavor.

Barley also makes a perfect base for salads. Mix cooked and drained barley with a dressing, then toss with greens and chopped vegetables. Or add leftover steamed or roasted vegetables to cooked barley for a quick and easy salad. When you have time, barley, mixed with sautéed vegetables, is fabulous stuffed in eggplant, peppers or squash and baked.

Here’s a simple side dish recipe to reacquaint yourself with this ancient, nutritious whole grain.

Lemon Barley

1 cup pearl barley
3 cups fat-free, reduced-sodium chicken or vegetable broth
1 large garlic clove, minced
¼ cup chopped fresh barley
2-3 Tbsp. olive oil
½ to 1 Tbsp. freshly grated lemon peel

Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
1/8 tsp. fennel seed

Rinse barley and place in a medium saucepan with broth. Cover and simmer, stirring occasionally, over medium-low heat until barley is tender, about 45 minutes. Add garlic; cook 5 minutes. Transfer barley mixture to fine sieve; drain well. Transfer mixture to bowl. Cover and chill completely. Before serving, add parsley, lemon juice, olive oil, lemon peel, salt, pepper and fennel seed. Toss well to combine.
Makes six servings. Per serving: 163 calories, 5 g total fat (< 1 g saturated fat), 27 g carbohydrates, 4 g protein, 5 g dietary fiber, 390 mg sodium.

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