

Healthy Granola – Made By You

Granola has a reputation as a health food. It is often labeled “all-natural” and “organic.” But is it actually healthy? Granola can be beneficial, but it depends on the ingredients, which can vary greatly. It is essential to look at the ingredient list. Typical ingredients for granola commonly include oats, seeds, nuts, and dried fruit.

Nutritionally speaking, oats contain fiber, which can lower cholesterol. The nuts usually found in granola provide healthy fats, and dried fruit contains potassium. However, the amounts of these nutritional benefits found in granola alone will not meet the daily recommended allowances. Granola has a very high carbohydrate content, which is good to provide energy for people during their busy day.

When reading the nutritional label of your favorite granola, be sure to look for added sweeteners, which are usually added to help bind the ingredients together and change the taste. Check for sweeteners and added sugars to determine if the granola meets your dietary goals. Remember, when reading the list of ingredients, they are listed in order by the content amount. So the higher on the list, the more of that ingredient the granola contains. Dextrose, fructose, high-fructose corn syrup, honey, molasses, syrups, and nectars are all just sugars by another name.

It is also important to read the ingredient list to look for artificial ingredients. I want my ingredient list to look like a shopping list I would use to make a recipe in my kitchen. If you don't recognize an ingredient as a real food, or it sounds like it was made in a lab, it probably is not the best choice. Look for granola made with all whole natural ingredients instead.

It is also essential to check the nutritional label for trans fats and saturated fats. These can increase the risk of heart disease, so it is vital to be aware of the levels in everything you eat and try to eat healthy, unsaturated fats whenever possible.

The best way to get granola or granola bars that contain the nutritional content you want is to make it yourself. It is simple to do, and the flavor combinations are endless. Eating granola with milk or yogurt with fresh fruit is a great way to get even more nutritional value from your granola snack or meal. To make a yogurt parfait using granola, simply layer any flavor yogurt, granola, and the fruit or toppings of your choice.

Making homemade granola bars gives you control over what you and your family are putting in your bodies during snack time. It is also a great way to ensure healthy ingredients with less sugar and preservatives. Many times, granola bars off the shelf are basically a candy bar in disguise. Ideally, healthy granola bars will contain nuts, grains, fruits, and be sweetened with honey or other natural syrups. Peanut butter or other nut butter is also a healthy ingredient to put in homemade granola bars that also helps bind ingredients together. Some recipes may call for baking the ingredients, but many are no-bake recipes that you can just press into a rectangular baking dish and then cut into bars. They are simple to make, and the nutritional benefit is worth your time.

In celebration of National Granola Bar day, January 21, try making your own at home with all-natural ingredients. Afternoon and mid-morning snack, solved!

Quick Granola Bars

Ingredients:

1/2 cup grated carrot

1 cup peanut butter or other nut butter

1 cup honey

3 1/2 cups rolled oats

1/2 cup raisins or other diced dried fruit

1/2 cup shredded coconut

Optional mix-ins: add seeds, ground spices (cinnamon, etc.), vanilla extract

Directions:

1. Preheat oven to 350°F.
2. Peel and grate the carrots; set aside.
3. Measure your peanut butter and honey and mix together in a large sauce pan. Cook on low heat until melted. Mix until smooth.
4. Remove the pan from heat and turn off the burner.
5. Add carrots, oatmeal, raisins, and coconut to the saucepan. If desired, add in any optional mix-ins. Stir well, and let it cool until you can safely touch it with your hands.
6. Put the mixture into the baking pan and press firmly into the bottom.
7. Bake for 25 minutes and then cut into 24 square bars. If you want long rectangular bars like what you purchase at the store, then use a larger, thinner pan.

Recipe Source: Pennsylvania Nutrition Education Program, Pennsylvania Nutrition Education Network

(Sources: foodnetwork.com; cookitquick.org; usda.gov, wholegrainscouncil.org)