

Whole grain advocates to boost awareness

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Advocates of whole grains look to transform understanding of its health benefits into action

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Most people know by now that eating a whole grain muffin is healthier than that sugary, fat-filled doughnut. Advocates of whole grains say their next step is to transform that understanding of whole grain's health benefits into action in the world's kitchens, grocery stores, schools, restaurants and even the military.

"We've overcome some barriers and now we're up against some more," said K. Dun Gifford, president of Oldways Preservation Trust, during a three-day conference in Kansas City this week.

Oldways, a Boston-based think tank that specializes in food issues, and The Whole Grains Council co-sponsored the conference to plan strategies for overcoming the remaining barriers to making whole grains more widely available.

"We're pretty sure we've broken down that business about whole grains being preindustrial, or raw from the farm," Gifford said. "The message is clear that they're healthy."

Good news trumpeted at the conference included several surveys showing that consumer knowledge about and preference for whole grains has grown substantially since 2000. For example, a Harris Interactive Survey in January 2006 found that 41 percent of 1,040 adults surveyed were eating more whole grains than the year before.

And Mintel Global News Products found that nearly 10 times as many whole grain products were introduced in 2006 than in 2000 including buns, cereals, pasta, rice and even a sparkling juice drink.

But much of the discussion centered on institutional barriers to increasing the use of whole grains, with schools cited as the most important but most difficult system to change.

Keith Fiedler, a former child nutrition director in a K-12 school system in Beaverton, Ore. and founder of healthy food distributor Madison Grace Corp., said directors of school food programs face intense pressure to improve school menus while having little control over labor, menus or budgets.

"They're in the midst of a wellness revolution not of their choosing," Fiedler said. "They are in the midst of a financial crisis. And the first line of defense will be to try and cut the food costs. It's contingent on us as manufacturers and suppliers to help them find the right choices at the right prices."

Gifford said parents must lead the charge for healthier school menus, while respecting the pressures that school districts face.

"It's not in Congress where the problem is, it's down where the rubber's meeting the road, every day in every school kitchen, the cafeteria, up to the colleges," he said. "We want to give them support, information and details, without criticizing them."

Whole grain advocates have had more success in restaurants, in part because of a "Just Ask

for Whole Grains" campaign that encourages people to make it clear they prefer whole grains. Chefs and other cooks are also learning to offer more dishes that incorporate whole grains.

"Restaurants really are getting this," said Cynthia Harriman, director of food and nutrition strategies for Oldways/The Whole Grains Council. "Once the choices get out there, consumers will choose them if they're available."

Even the military has jumped on the whole grains bandwagon.

Lori Tubbs, a nutritionist and program manager at the Naval Special Warfare/Navy Environmental Health Center in Norfolk, Va., said the military is like the larger society, meaning it is encountering weight and health problems related to poor nutrition. She has worked to improve the nutrition and health of sailors for nearly 10 years, and says the effort is even more important in a time of war.

"Somebody has to fly that jet, somebody's got to go into a kill house," she said. "That person better have some high octane fuel to be able to think cognitively, to be able to perform the mission and complete it, and to be able to last in the system longer."

On all fronts, Gifford said the next steps are to offer more products, expand their availability and to continue education efforts.

"We have a responsibility to make it work," he said. "People want something that's realistic. Something that can be done to make a difference, not just another dream in the sky."

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