

# High-Fiber Foods May Be Easier To Stomach This Time Around

BY ILAN BRAT

Food makers are packing more products with high amounts of fiber, and they're betting that new food technology can overcome consumers' traditional distaste for the goods.

Danone SA's Activia recently introduced a line of yogurt containing three grams of fiber, or 12% of the U.S. government's recommended daily intake on a 2,000-calorie diet. Kellogg Co. said that, by the end of 2010, the bulk of its U.S. cereals will contain at least 10% of recommended consumption.

General Mills Inc., which in recent years

has sharply expanded its Fiber One line of cereals to include snack bars, baking mixes and yogurts, this month is rolling out a new line of Progresso soups with 28% of the recommended daily fiber intake per cup.

Packaged foods making fiber claims was one of the fastest growing categories in the U.S. in the past year, increasing in unit sales by 10.2% in the 12 months ended Aug. 8, according to Nielsen Co. data that exclude Wal-Mart Stores Inc. and other nontraditional retailers.

The new fiber push is part of food makers' effort to burnish the healthful sheen of their menus. Consumers are demanding more nutrition from their packaged foods, and food manufacturers hope that adding ingredients such as vitamins and fiber to foods, rather than merely removing unhealthy fat, sodium and sugar, will help stimulate sales.

"Consumers respond better to positive messages. They feel like they're losing something if you take away the salt, sugar or fat," says Mary Ellen Camire, a nutrition professor at the University of Maine.

Food companies are also hoping to fend off incursions by lower-priced private-label products. Because the added fiber tends to be costly, "it will be extremely difficult for private label to copy," David Mackay, Kellogg's chief executive, said in a recent interview.

But rapidly increasing one's fiber intake can have unintended consequences. A growing number of high-fiber products carry cautionary statements on the packaging that quickly boosting fiber intake can lead to "gastrointestinal discomfort."

Basically, fiber is any carbohydrate that the hu-  
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man digestive system can't fully break down. Fibers thus help drive other waste through the digestive tract. But a rapid increase in fiber intake can have such side effects as flatulence, bloating and cramps. That's because intestinal muscles unaccustomed to pushing as much fibrous material through the body are forced to work harder and gut bacteria convert some of the fiber into gases.

Scientists have found benefits to a diet rich in fiber. Some fibers can help eaters feel full faster and longer, so they tend to eat less. Studies also have shown that fiber can help regulate sugar spikes in the body, an important factor for diabetics; draw cholesterol out of the blood; and possibly help the body fight off disease or infection by boosting the number of beneficial bacteria in the gut. Still, Americans on average consume only about half the government's recommended fiber intake of 25 grams a day.

Fiber has been a fad before. Kellogg became a pioneer in high-fiber packaged foods with the launch of its Bran Flakes and All-Bran cereals early in the last century. In 1985, General Mills introduced its Fiber One cereal amid another such craze.

But each time, interest faded, thanks largely to taste. Consumers complained that the foods, traditionally loaded with wheat and oat bran, were bland and grainy, according to food industry executives and scientists.

"When you talk to consumers, the No. 1 word they use is 'cardboard'—fiber products taste like cardboard," says David Clark, vice president of marketing for General Mills's Big G cereals.

Food companies say new technologies are helping to make fiber-filled foods tastier.

New grinding processes helped General Mills better shape fiber particles to reduce grittiness in the newest Fiber One cereals, says John Mendesh, vice president of research and development for the cereals division. Also, properly cooking the fiber in recipes used to require high heat and water, which tended to dull the taste of other ingredients such as honey and cinnamon. New cooking methods now allow the company's recipe makers to use less heat and water, helping to preserve more of the formula's taste.

Ingredient makers have also developed new sources for fiber powders and liquids beyond the traditional wheat and oats. They're extracting fiber from

corn, seaweed and roots of herbs such as chicory or using bacteria to synthesize fibers. These new fiber types can have cleaner tastes or even enhance the flavors of fruit, chocolate and vanilla, says Cristina Munteanu, senior food scientist with ingredients-maker GTC Nutrition, a unit of Corn Products International Inc., which supplies sweeteners and starches. The latest fibers can also help retain the chewy textures of baked goods and snack bars.

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"The nice thing of a lot of these [fibers] is, they're kind of easy to sneak into a lot of these products," says Joanne Slavin, a nutrition professor and fiber researcher at the University of Minnesota. Today, "you can make really good white bread and people don't know they're eating fiber."

Some food companies are bragging about the taste of their new high-fiber products. In a press release last month, Kellogg

said the results of a test conducted by a third party showed that consumers thought its new Kellogg's FiberPlus snack bars tasted better than General Mills' Fiber One bars.

Like the Fiber One snacks, each Kellogg's FiberPlus bar contains 9 grams of fiber, or 35% of the recommended daily intake. Extract of chicory root, a fiber from a common herb, is the first ingredient listed on both products. Mr. Clark, of General Mills, says he hasn't seen Kellogg's data but says sales of all Fiber One products are growing rapidly.

Some dieticians caution that some products touting a high-fiber content also are high in ingredients such as sugar, fat or salt. For example, each of The Skinny Cow's low-fat fudge bars has four grams of fiber and 13 grams of sugars, equal to about three teaspoons of table sugar. Two tablespoons of Safeway's private-label brand of butter-flavored popcorn has three grams of fiber and 15% of the government's recommended daily limit of sodium. Each of Mission brand's 10-inch Carb Balance Whole Wheat Tortillas contains 84% of the recommended daily fiber intake and 23% of the recommended sodium limit.