Nutrition Bars

Nutrition bars have a lot of benefits. First (and most important to many students), they are very convenient! They're pre-portioned, individually-wrapped, non-perishable, ready-to-eat meals or snacks that can easily slip into a backpack, gym bag, purse, office drawer, or car glove department. Second, most are heavily fortified with vitamins and minerals (just like a bowl of breakfast cereal), many offer as much calcium as a glass of milk, some provide as much protein as a small chicken breast, and a few offer a good dose of fiber. Without a doubt, they are a much more nutritious choice than a candy bar, box of cookies, or bag of chips from a vending machine for a quick, on-the-go meal or snack. And, many nutrition bars taste REALLY good!

Read on to learn...

• Whether nutrition bars are superior to regular whole foods.
• If there are hidden dangers in some of these bars.
• How to include nutrition bars in your eating plan.

More hype than they’re worth?

The biggest problem with sports bars is all the marketing hype. After seeing the ads for these bars, you might believe they will “rev up your energy,” “build your muscles,” “help you lose weight,” or “boost your brain power.” In fact, these bars offer no unique advantage over other foods for these purposes.

• For example, ads for high carb bars (like PowerBar, Clif Bar, and Tiger's Milk) show people running, leaping, and otherwise looking energetic...they claim to give you more energy. Luckily for food companies, the word "energy" has a double meaning. To most people, a food that supplies "energy" makes you feel energetic. But to scientists and the literal-minded regulators at the FDA, "energy" simply means calories. Any product that has calories will provide you with energy. Studies show that a high carbohydrate food (like a bagel or Nature Valley granola bar) provides the same aerobic exercise performance as one of these bars. But the food item costs a lot less! See nutrient comparison below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Power Bar</th>
<th>240 calories, 45 g carbs, 10 g protein, 2 g fat</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vs. Small bagel</td>
<td>240 calories, 45 g carbs, 10 g protein, 2 g fat</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

• Similarly, high protein bars (like MetRx, EAS Myoplex, Protein Revolution, and Pure Protein) claim to have "proprietary blends" of whey or soy protein and other ingredients like "growth factors" that will help “bulk you up.” It is true that you need more calories and protein to build muscle, and these bars do have a hefty dose of both (up to 340 calories and 35 g protein). But, it's not true that these bars offer any unique advantage over other protein foods. You can easily meet your higher calorie and protein needs with regular foods, but often at a much lower cost.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Met Rx Bar + water</th>
<th>320 calories, 26 g protein, 52 g carbs, 2.5 g fat</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vs. Grilled chicken sandwich + 8 oz. carton of fat-free milk:</td>
<td>340 calories, 32 g protein, 45 g carbs, 3 g fat</td>
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</table>
Nutrition Bars

Hidden costs
Marketing hype aside, are there any other problems associated with these bars? For one, these bars are concentrated, high calorie foods. For athletes and other very active people, this is a good thing—they need the extra calories. But, for people who are not very active and/or are concerned about weight control, high calorie bars should be used mostly as meal replacements, not as snacks. A piece of fruit, cup of raw veggies, small carton of yogurt, or string cheese make better, lower calorie snacks. Second, some bars are high in heart-damaging saturated fat and trans fat (i.e. partially hydrogenated vegetable oils), and most bars get their carbohydrate from high fructose corn syrup and other added sugars (just like candy bars). And, finally, none of them provide the disease-fighting phytonutrients that only whole foods like fruits, vegetables, and whole grains provide.

Tips for including nutrition bars in a healthy eating plan
Nutrition bars certainly have their place in a healthy eating plan. If you decide to include them, keep these tips in mind:

• Choose bars that have some whole grains (like whole oats and brown rice), nuts, and/or fruit. This should bump up the fiber content to at least 3 g per bar. Healthy examples: Clif, Boulder, PowerBar Harvest, Balance Outdoor, and Genisoy Nature Grains.

• Read labels to make sure your bar is lower in saturated fat (no more than 3 g). And, choose a bar that doesn't add partially hydrogenated vegetable oil (0 trans fat). Usually bars that are not chocolate- or yogurt-coated are lower in saturated and trans fat. NOTE: If you choose a bar that has more saturated and/or trans fat, think of it as a candy bar and enjoy no more than one a day. Limit your intake of other foods high in saturated/trans fat (like red meat, cheese, butter/margarine, fried foods, and many baked goods/sweets) so your total daily saturated/trans fat intake remains low.

• If you're choosing a bar as a meal replacement, choose one that has more protein (at least 14 g of protein). NOTE: Many higher protein bars (20-30+ g protein) have more saturated fat. If you choose such a bar, limit your intake to one bar a day. And, at other meals, choose protein-rich foods that are very low in saturated fat (such as grilled chicken breast, turkey, canned tuna, beans, egg whites, and fat free milk products).

• If you're trying to lose weight and like having bars for in-between-meal snacks, choose one with no more than 200 calories. If you're trying to gain weight, choose one with more calories.

• Aim for at least 5 servings of fruit and vegetables daily (but preferably 7-10). Nutrition bars lack the disease-fighting phytonutrients that only these whole plant foods provide.

• Be sure to include at least 3 servings of whole grains daily (whether from whole grain sports bars or whole grain cereals, whole wheat breads, oatmeal, brown or wild rice, whole wheat pasta, or whole wheat cous cous).