

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).