

Refined flour substitutes abound—but how to choose the best one?

April 2 2021, by Maria Elena Fernandez



A trip down a grocery store's baking goods aisle can leave you in a daze

these days if you're thinking about replacing white or all-purpose flour with one of the many alternatives on shelves.

In recent years, the pantry staple used for baking and making pasta has become a dietary public enemy, giving way to healthier nut and seed flours, such as almond, chickpea and even banana.

But figuring out how and when to replace [white flour](#) can feel overwhelming since flours are not necessarily interchangeable and can change the taste and texture of any given recipe.

"It's difficult to take a baking recipe and completely substitute with whole-grain flour or nut flour or other kinds of [grains](#)," said Mary Ellen Camire, a professor of food science and human nutrition at the University of Maine in Orono. She also is scientific editor of two journals, *Comprehensive Reviews in Food Science and Food Safety* and the *Journal of Food Science*.

"You need to have the ratio of starch to gluten in the flour to be able to get cake or bread to rise. You can replace some of it, but if you replace too much, you will end up with something like a fudge brownie instead of a puffy bread."

So what do you do? The first thing, Camire said, is not to ban white or all-purpose flour altogether.

While refined grains contain less fiber and can spike blood sugar levels, which is stored as body fat, they can still be consumed in moderation. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend eating three servings of whole grains a day and less than three servings of refined grains, all-purpose flour or [white rice](#).

A cup of white all-purpose flour typically contains 443 calories,

compared with 407 calories in a cup of whole-wheat flour, which has more dietary fiber than all-purpose flour (14.6 grams compared to 3.4 grams).

"The guidelines do not recommend you exclude refined grains from your diet," Camire said. "White or all-purpose flour is less nutritious because, in the milling process, they take off the outer bran, which contains most of the [dietary fiber](#), and the germ, which is the heart of the seed.

"It's become easy to point a finger and say white foods are bad. All-purpose flour has a lot less fiber than whole-wheat flour, but keeping it at less than half of the grains you eat each day is the trick."

Camire suggests beginning by substituting some all-purpose flour in recipes with white whole-wheat flour, a milder variety of wheat flour that will be less noticeable in baked goods than traditional red or darker whole-wheat flour.

"It's an easy swap and most people won't notice it as compared to the darker whole-wheat flours," she said. But "you have to be resourceful figuring out what might be a suitable substitute because you can't just replace all-purpose flour with another flour and be on your way."

Oat and barley flour, for example, are considered healthier because of their fiber content but are not ideal for baking. "They are more for thickening so you can use them for stirring up and thickening soups or gravies," Camire said.

Brown rice flour, on the other hand, is a good choice for those who follow gluten-free diets. It is useful for cupcakes or cookies but not for bread. Almond flour, made from blanched whole almonds, also is used in gluten-free and low-carb cooking.

Buckwheat flour, which is made from ground buckwheat and is a good source of fiber and protein, has become popular because it is used to make traditional Japanese soba noodles and pancakes.

Coconut flour, made from dried and ground up coconuts, is packed with fiber and healthy fats and is a suitable option for those with nut allergies.

The point is, it's still possible to enjoy your bread, dessert and pasta.

"I think we need to make whole grains more affordable and accessible to people, but including products that have some all-purpose [flour](#) is not going to harm anyone," Camire said.

"It's just about balance. You don't want to spend the day eating cookies and cakes and white rolls. There needs to be whole grains in the picture."

More information: [American Heart Association News](#)

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