



Cereal bars

They are marketed as the ideal replacement for breakfast and as healthy snacks but should cereal bars be banished to the confectionery shelf?

Cereal bars are made from grains such as oats, rye, rice, and wheat and usually have added fruit or fruit flavouring. These bars are often marketed as a healthy and convenient alternative to breakfast, particularly for people on the go. Some versions are even marketed to children and use cartoon characters and health claims about their nutritional value to attract attention. Manufacturers of cereal bars frequently enrich their products with vitamins in a bid to attract consumers who are increasingly conscious of the need to make healthy food choices.

Cereal bars certainly present a healthier image than traditional confectionery products such as chocolate bars and crisps. However, cereal bars are often loaded with sugar and usually need sugary syrup to pull all the ingredients together and hold them in the shape of a bar. So are they really as healthy as their image may suggest? And should consumers really be turning to them when they need to breakfast in a hurry?

Our test

Consumer Choice decided to put cereal bars to the test, both for taste and for nutritional content. We randomly chose seven offerings from well-known manufacturers that are readily available

in supermarkets. We examined the nutrition labels for sugar, saturated fat, sodium and fibre content and highlighted our findings in a traffic light colour coded table (opposite).

Cereal bar sizes vary between the brands making it hard to compare like with like, so we examined the nutritional values per 100g.

In terms of sugar and saturated fat content, some of our findings raised serious concerns. Over 5g per 100g in saturated fat is considered high while any product with more than 12.5g of sugar per 100g is considered high in sugar. All of the products are very high in sugar, ranging from 25g to 42g per 100g. Kellogg's Coco Pops Cereal and Milk Bars are the highest in sugar with 42g per 100g. Three of the bars got a red light for saturated fats with Harvest Morn containing a worrying 9g per 100g of saturates. Of the bars tested, only the Tesco Cranberry bars would be considered low in fat with 0.7g of saturates per 100g. We were pleased to note that none of the cereal bars got a red light for sodium content but the fibre levels in three of the bars would be considered too low.

Results

Kellogg's Coco Pops Cereal and Milk

Bars 6 Bars x 20g

What the packaging says: 'Free from artificial colours', 'Free from hydrogenated fats', 'Source of calcium, iron and 6 vitamins.'

These are clearly marketed at children, as the advertising on the box says that the bars are 'ideal for the lunchbox' as a snack for your kids and there is a Coco cartoon character on the front of the box. Children should be getting their calories from foods such as meat, milk, cheese, whole grains, fish and eggs, and not from foods loaded with sugar and saturated fat.

Taste test verdict 5.5/10

Our tasters found this very sweet and chocolatey, and more like a chocolate bar than cereal bar. As one said "It's nice as a sweet treat but I doubt it has any value at all as a nutritional breakfast!"

Harvest Morn Fruit and Fibre (Aldi)

6 bars x 28.5g

What the packaging says: 'For a nutritious snack... any time of the day.'

The packing may claim that there is a nutritious snack for all the family inside but after checking the ingredients list we found that glucose syrup, i.e. sugar, is the first and therefore the highest ingredient in these bars.

Taste test verdict 5/10

This cereal bar is crunchier than the others and not as sweet. A number of testers said it lacked flavour while others found it had a coconut or nutty taste.

Sirius Müsli Cranberry (Lidl)

8 bars x 25g

What the packaging says: 'Cereal bar with dried, sweetened cranberries.'

The cranberries are sweetened and dried and make up only 4.5% of the ingredients. The grain content is 30% and after grains, glucose-fructose syrup is the second highest ingredient.

Taste test verdict 5/10

Our tasters found this cereal bar citrusy – one even said it has a slightly chemical aftertaste. Others found it sweet and mentioned that it has a lot of oats rather than fruit.

Kellogg's Special K Original

6 bars x 23g

What the packaging says: '90 calorie bar range.'

These bars are marketed as a snack for weight-conscious consumers: 'While you're watching what you eat, snacking can be a real dilemma. Kellogg's Special

AT A GLANCE

Our test.

Breakfast suggestions.

CEREAL BARS

Product	Manufacturer	Bar Size (g)	Sugars (g per 100g)	Fats (g per 100g)	Of which saturates (g)	Salt (g per 100g)	Fibre (g per 100g)
Kellogg's Coco Pops Cereal and Milk Bars	Kellogg	20	42	12	9	0.65	1
Harvest Morn Fruit and Fibre (Aldi)	Harvest Morn	28.5	31	15.4	5.6	0.3	5.1
Sirius Müsli Cranberry (Lidl)	Sirius	25	27	8.8	6.6	0.1	4.8
Kellogg's Special K Original	Kellogg	23	38	5	3.5	0.65	2
Kellogg's Nutri-Grain Strawberry Morning Bars	Kellogg	37	33	8	3	0.75	3.5
Tesco Cranberry Cereal Bars	Tesco	27	26.7	4.7	0.7	0.3	2.2
Tesco Value Strawberry Cereal Bars	Tesco	20.8	25.5	6.2	2.6	0.4	4.6

K is here to help.' However, if you were to examine the label you might not be so confident about the contents. After cereals (45%), sugar is the next ingredient.

Taste test verdict 6/10

This bar was declared to be very sweet and fruity by our tasters and one really liked the mix of cranberry and yogurt. However, it is more of a tasty treat than a breakfast substitute.

Kellogg's Nutri-Grain Strawberry Morning Bars 8 bars x 37g

What the packaging says: 'Source of fibre' 'With Calcium and Iron' 'Missed breakfast? Time for a Nutri-Grain Morning Bar!'

After cereals (32%), sugar is the next highest ingredient. The only mention of strawberries in the ingredient list reads; 'strawberry puree from concentrate (7.5%) and this comes after the sugar, glucose-fructose syrup and fructose.

Taste test verdict 5/10

A number of testers compared this cereal bar to cake! The texture is very soft – almost no chewing required – and it tastes very sweet.

Tesco Cranberry Cereal Bars 5 bars x 27g

What the packaging says: 'A source of folic acid', 'Fortified with vitamins and iron.'

Glucose syrup, i.e. sugar, is the first and therefore the highest ingredient in these bars. At 9%, the cranberry content is low, particularly since sweetened with sugar.

Taste test verdict 6.5/10

Testers described this product as syrupy and a bit sticky. However, it tastes less sweet than some of the other cereal bars and as one tester said it is "more natural and more substantial" than others. This was rated the highest of all the products tested and interestingly, it had the lowest amount of saturated fats and the second

NUTRITIONAL CRITERIA ¹

	Green (low)	Amber (medium)	Red (high)
Fat	≤3.0g/100g	>3.0 to ≤20.0g/100g	>20.0g/100g
Saturates	≤1.5g/100g	>1.5 to ≤5.0g/100g	>5.0g/100g
Sugar	≤5.0g/100g	>5.0 to ≤12.5g/100g	>12.5g/100g
Salt	≤0.30g/100g	>0.30 to ≤1.50g/100g	>1.50g/100g
	Red (low)	Amber (medium)	Green (high)
Fibre	≤3.0g/100g	>3.0g to ≤6g/100g	>6g/100g

¹ UK Food Standards Agency (FSA) nutritional criteria for traffic light signpost labelling. The fibre rating is also based on FSA criteria, but this nutrient is not part of the traffic light scheme.

lowest amount of sugar.

Tesco Value Strawberry Cereal Bars 6 bars x 2.08g

Glucose syrup is the first ingredient in this product. We are told that the strawberry 'flavoured' pieces (12%) contain fructose-glucose syrup, sugar, vegetable fat, and concentrated strawberry juice which leads us to believe that there is no real fruit at all used to make them.

Taste test verdict 5/10

The verdict was mixed. While some tasters said the product is bland and lacks flavour, one found it quite substantial and filling, and liked the crunchy texture and taste.

Breakfast suggestions

It is important to set aside time in the

morning for a substantial breakfast.

Porridge is a great option for both children and adults. It is naturally low in salt and is digested slowly, keeping you fuller for longer. Porridge made and served with milk provides calcium and useful amounts of protein. Roasted seeds and nuts can be added for extra nutrients and berries offer sweetness and additional nutrients.

The following are some further healthy breakfast suggestions from the Irish Nutrition and Dietetic Institute (INDI, see *Useful contacts*):

- Wholemeal toast with sliced banana.
- Grilled mushrooms on a slice of wholegrain toast.
- Grilled tomato with scrambled egg on wholegrain toast.
- Baked beans on wholegrain toast.
- Yoghurt with fruit and muesli.

Useful contacts

INDI Irish Nutrition and Dietetic Institute
Ashgrove House
Kill Avenue
Dun Laoghaire
Co. Dublin
email info@indi.ie
www.indi.ie

Report by
Sinéad Mc Mahon 

choice comment

Don't be fooled by the packaging and the health claims. There is no nutritional benefit in having a snack that is full of sugar and unhealthy fats. The rapid sugar boost will quickly fade away causing your sugar levels to crash, making you even hungrier and in danger of overeating at lunchtime. Ideally your breakfast should set you up for the day rather than setting you up for pre-lunch snacking.

After surveying what is available, we certainly feel that cereal bars in their current form should not be relied upon to provide a healthy snack or to replace a nutritious breakfast. If manufacturers of cereal bars seriously hope to position their products as healthy foods, they should tone down the sweetness and the fat content and focus on providing far more nutrition and substance.