Noodles: “Noo” and Improved!

If you peruse the pasta aisle of your local grocery store, you’ll find a great variety of new pasta products – some made traditionally, from refined durum/semolina wheat flour, others from whole wheat (which is typically unrefined durum wheat flour), and yet others from different food products entirely – like lentils, brown rice, quinoa and beans! Public interest in specific nutrients like protein and fiber, as well as health conditions like heart disease, diabetes and food allergies/intolerances have driven the demand for healthier, wholesome foods – and pasta is no exception. Extensive research and development have resulted in remarkably flavored and textured pasta products with added nutritional benefits.

WHOLE WHEAT PASTA
Many dietitians recommend 100% whole wheat pasta over traditional pasta (its refined counterpart) because of the nutritional benefits. Whole wheat and traditional pasta have roughly the same number of calories (about 200 calories/2 oz svg) and both types are low in fat with no cholesterol, BUT 100% whole wheat pasta offers more nutritional value. Depending on the brand, whole wheat pasta will typically give you an extra gram (or a few more) of protein, more than double the fiber*, and more than double the potassium**, among other important nutrients. When choosing whole wheat pasta, it is important to read the ingredient list; the word “whole” should be first in the ingredient list (i.e. “whole durum wheat flour”), and ideally, you shouldn’t see “enriched” anywhere on the ingredient list (typically, “enriched” flours have been stripped of the germ and bran portion of the wheat kernel, and therefore, are stripped of the important nutrients found in those parts of the kernel; the “enrichment” process involves adding some, BUT NOT ALL, of the nutrients that were lost in the refining process). Thankfully, today’s whole wheat pastas offer better flavor and texture than the first whole wheat pastas on the market a few years back; those were brittle, grainy, and dense. Generally speaking (and depending on the brand) whole wheat “flat pastas”, like fettuccini, linguini and spaghetti can be almost indistinguishable from traditional (refined) pasta. The flavor and texture differences may be more apparent in the “extruded” pastas, like rotini, penne, and fusilli.

ALTERNATIVE INGREDIENT PASTA – MORE PROTEIN AND FIBER!
There are a number of pasta products out there that combine wheat (either refined or whole) with other foods, like beans, lentils, and brown rice; some products don’t contain any wheat at all. The Pow! Protein Pasta line by Ancient Harvest is available at HEB and offers spaghetti, elbow macaroni, linguini, penne, and rotini made from 1-3 ingredients – simple and wholesome. For example: the black bean elbows are made from black bean flour, brown rice flour, and quinoa flour. The only ingredients in the green lentil spaghetti are green lentils and quinoa. These pasta products offer fewer grams of carbohydrates*** and substantially more protein***** and fiber**** – in some cases DOUBLE and TRIPLE that of traditional, refined pasta. Admittedly, some of these alternative pasta products have a different flavor/textured than traditional pasta, but usually a flavorful heavy-bodied sauce can cover up those differences. And while the flavor/texture are “different”, they aren’t necessarily “bad”. Because these alternative ingredient pasta products don’t contain any wheat, they are appropriate for those with celiac disease or an intolerance to gluten. Additionally, they would
add a hearty protein source for meatless meals that frequently lack protein. Another option is the Barilla Protein Plus line of pastas. Although the first ingredient in the list is semolina wheat (refined), it also contains a flour blend of lentils, chickpeas, barley, spelt and oats, as well as some egg whites and flaxseed, for additional nutrients like protein, fiber, and omega 3 fatty acids. Not all alternative ingredient pasta is created equally – be sure to compare information on the Nutrition Facts panel to choose a healthy one.

WHAT IS “VEGGIE PASTA” AND IS IT GOOD FOR ME?
Another group of interesting products you’ll find in the pasta aisle are products labeled “veggie pasta”. You’ll read claims about getting a “full serving of vegetables” in a 3.5 oz serving while looking at multi-veggie-colored pieces of pasta inside the package. While there is nothing “wrong” with these products, they do tend to be a bit misleading. First of all, there’s isn’t a formal definition of “full serving” of vegetables, though the USDA has used “1/2 cup cooked vegetables” as “1 serving” in the past. The misleading part is that you have to eat 3.5 oz of pasta to get the “full serving of vegetables”; when you look at the Nutrition Facts table you’ll see that “1 serving” of the pasta is 2 oz...so basically, you have to eat almost 2 “servings” of pasta (or about 350 calories) in order to get that “1 full serving” of vegetables you were promised on the front of the package. If you eat the standard “2 oz” serving (200 calories) of pasta, you’ll get little more than ½ a serving of vegetables. And remember, everything on the ingredient list is there, in order, by weight. In the majority of these “veggie pasta” products, you’ll see that the first ingredient is “semolina flour” (enriched, refined flour), so basically, these products still contain more refined wheat flour than anything else. The vegetable purees and/or vegetable powders follow the semolina flour on the ingredient list and are therefore, present in much smaller amounts. A quick review of the Nutrition Facts panel will show you that the protein, fiber, and micronutrients are almost identical to traditional, refined pasta. The addition of small amounts of powdered vegetables or pureed vegetables are unlikely to provide much nutritional benefit.

SPIRALIZED VEGETABLES AS A SUBSTITUTE FOR PASTA
A fairly recent trend involves using fresh vegetables in place of pasta; the vegetables (often zucchini, butternut squash, sweet potato, beets, cucumbers, carrots, and/or broccoli stems to name a few) are thinly sliced into spiral-shaped strips that resemble noodles. The tool that makes them into their spaghetti-like shape is called a “spiralizer”; you can buy one and make these “noodles’ yourself. You can also purchase them pre-made for you. They are available fresh, in the produce section (Cece’s Veggie Noodle Co is one line available at HEB) or in the frozen vegetable aisle (Jolly Green Giant Veggie Spirals). For the most part, these veggie spirals have far fewer calories and carbs than regular pasta and contain good-for-you micronutrients too, but as far as flavor and texture, they are far from the real deal. If you really love pasta, you may want to try mixing in SOME veggie spirals into your “regular” pasta dish. if you want to learn more about spiral veggies, check out this article here: https://campusrec.utsa.edu/uploads/general-files/Fitness/SP18/Gluten-free-paleo-lower-carb_Diet_Hacks.pdf
BOTTOM LINE: Any type of pasta can fit into a healthy diet, in moderation, of course. But if food allergies/intolerances, nutrition goals (like protein, fiber, potassium, calories, etc) have prevented you from enjoying it, perhaps some of the newer options on the market may be worth a try. If you have more questions about pasta or any other nutrition-related matter, be sure to set up a nutrition assessment with Campus Recreation’s registered dietitian nutritionist, Annie Bell. Appointments are individualized to address your needs, questions, and concerns and last about an hour – oh, and they’re free! Follow the prompts here to register: https://campusrec.utsa.edu/nutritionregistration

*fiber whole wheat vs traditional (refined) - 5g vs 2g per 2 oz svg
**potassium whole wheat vs traditional (refined) 260 mg vs 110 per 2 oz svg
***Pow! Pasta Green Lentil 35 g carb vs traditional (refined) 42 g carb per 2 oz svg
****Pow! Pasta Green Lentil 7 g fiber vs traditional (refined) 2 g fiber per 2 oz svg
*****Pow! Pasta Green Lentil 14g protein vs traditional (refined ) 7 g protein per 2 oz svg

https://ancientharvest.com/shop/