OAT-SO-GOOD: SO MANY REASONS TO OPT FOR OATS

INSTANT OATS
During manufacturing, the moisture is squeezed out of instant oats, so they’re rolled and pressed thin. This makes cooking instant oats a snap—it’s essentially reheating them, which only takes a few minutes. The convenience comes at a cost, though, as instant oats are often on the mushy side, and store-bought oats are often loaded with added sugar and artificial flavors.

OAT GROATS
At the opposite end of the spectrum from instant oats, oats are oats that have barely been processed at all. With groats, only the inedible hull has been removed, leaving the germ, bran and endosperm whole—and all the fiber, protein, iron and copper they contain. Groats have a nutty taste and digest slowly, so they’re an excellent choice for anyone on a low-glycemic-index diet. They also take the longest to cook, so it’s a good idea to let them soak overnight first.

ROLLED OATS
Those oats snuggled up next to fruit and yogurt in oh-so-photogenic social media posts? They’re likely rolled oats, prepared by steaming whole oat grains, which are then flattened with a roller and dried. Also known as old-fashioned oats, rolled oats are a quick-cooking option that are most commonly used in baked goods and granola bars because they retain their texture and have a mild taste. They’re also the go-to choice for overnight oats. Oats can help lower cholesterol and they’re filling, so eating them for breakfast may help reduce calorie intake later in the day.

STEEL-CUT OATS
Rather than being steamed and flattened like rolled oats, steel-cut (or Irish) oats are whole oat grains that have been roughly chopped—looks-wise, they’re often compared to grains of rice that have been cut in half. Though cut oats are bigger than other kinds of oats and don’t soak up as much water, so they can be chewy, but they swell over time in the refrigerator. Just a half-cup of steel-cut oats contains 94% of the daily recommended amount of manganese, a mineral that’s known for keeping bones and tissues healthy, and for combating inflammation.

YOUR HEALTH TIPS
Oats and oatmeal have enjoyed a resurgence in recent years, as turned trendy seemingly out of nowhere. But Yin Cao, ScD, MPH, associate professor of surgery at Washington University School of Medicine, points out that humans have been incorporating oats into their diets since the Paleolithic era.

“Packed with complex carbohydrates, vitamins and minerals, oats are among the most nutrient-dense foods you can eat,” she said. “The consumption of oats has been determined to be beneficial for human health by aiding in the reduction of blood glucose and insulin responses, increased growth of good bacteria in the digestive tract and the regulation of Type 2 diabetes,” Cao said. Further, it takes oats a long time to digest, and they’re full of fiber, meaning you’ll feel satisfied for longer and be less likely to eat excess calories throughout the day. Oats are also a good source of nutrients such as manganese and copper, and there’s evidence they help lower cholesterol.

If you hear “oats” but think “mush,” there are plenty of ways to add some texture and flavor to your morning routine. Oats and bananas will give a satisfying crunch, while fresh fruit and spices can conjure endless flavor combinations—not to mention extra vitamins. It’s tempting to opt for instant oatmeal, but those store-bought varieties can be high in calories and use artificial flavors. Cao recommends taking a different tack: “Limited time in the morning? Oats can be prepared the evening before as a type of overnight oats. Simply add the prepared oats in a jar with your favorite toppings and leave them in the refrigerator until you’re ready to go the next morning,” she says. “Looking for an on-the-go snack? Oats make the perfect base. Simply add in your favorite fruit and you have a fairly treat to get you through the day.”

Dark chocolate oat bars

3 ripe bananas
1 ¼ cup oats
1/4 cup peanut butter
½ cup dark chocolate chips
1 tsp vanilla extract
1 tsp cinnamon
PREPARATION
Preheat oven to 350°F. Mash ripe bananas in a large mixing bowl and mix in all other ingredients. (Save a few chocolate chips for later to sprinkle on top.)

Pour mixture into a greased 8-by-15-inch baking dish, using spatula to smooth batter. Sprinkle remaining chocolate chips on top.

Bake 15 to 20 minutes, or until a toothpick comes out clean.

Allow to cool and cut into squares. Can store in the fridge for up to five days.