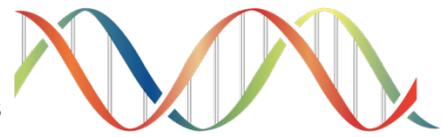




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Community BioRefineries,

Everyday Health *Diet & Nutrition*

Is Quinoa Good for You? Everything You Need to Know About the Superfood

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Quinoa is a gluten-free seed that can make a great substitute for rice and other grains. Learn more about its health benefits and uses here.

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It seems these days, quinoa (pronounced KEEN-wah) is still all anyone talks about. Everywhere we turn there are quinoa salads, quinoa fried rice, and now even quinoa protein shakes. Forged in South America thousands of years ago and called "the mother grain" by the Inca, quinoa today is still considered a wonderful "superfood" — especially once the United Nations declared 2013 the "International Year of Quinoa." (Yes, that happened). ([1](#))

But when and why did quinoa become so popular? What is it that makes this low-carb rice substitute so invaluable in the world of nutrition despite all the years that have passed?

Its popularity today may have just been good timing. In 2014, the *Wall Street Journal* dubbed quinoa "the perfect collision of trends," which [Abbey Sharp, RD](#), a blogger at [Abbey's Kitchen](#), totally gets. ([2](#)) "I think quinoa saw its biggest spike in popularity in 2014. This was partially because it's a naturally gluten-free grain, which became important with the gluten-free trend," she says. And because of its protein base, "this helped coincide with the rise in the vegan trend."

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Quinoa has since maintained buzz as one of the most popular health-food trends, including low- and gluten-free diet plans. But now at the peak of its popularity, some of us are returning to ask, well, what in the heck is it?

We're here to explain.

What Is Quinoa Exactly?

According to the Whole Grains Council, quinoa is a gluten-free, whole-grain carbohydrate, as well as a whole protein (meaning it contains all nine essential amino acids). (3) Most of this information is well known. But when it comes to whether quinoa is a whole grain or not, many people get confused. So, let's clear this up.

Technically, the quinoa we all know and love is actually a seed from the *Chenopodium quinoa* plant. So no, it is not a grain. Whole grains (or cereal grains), like oats and barley, are defined as seeds extracted from grasses — not plants.

But the way we eat quinoa does resemble a whole grain. Because of this, the nutrition world considers it a whole grain. Or if you want to get real technical with it, quinoa is actually quantified as a “pseudo-cereal” — a term used to describe foods that are prepared and eaten as a whole grain, but are botanical outliers from grasses.

But the preferred colloquial term (though it may be slightly untrue) is whole grain.

What Are the Nutritional Facts for Quinoa?

Overall, quinoa has an incredible nutrition base. Compared with refined grains, whole grains like quinoa are considered better sources of fiber, protein, B vitamins, and iron, according to the Mayo Clinic. (4) But aside from these key nutrients, one of the greatest nutrient profiles quinoa can offer is its level of protein.

Because protein makes up 15 percent of the grain, as reported by the Grains & Legumes Nutrition Council, quinoa is a high-protein, low-fat grain option. (5) It's also naturally gluten free, high in fiber, and provides many key vitamins and minerals, including vitamin B and magnesium. Because it is so nutrient-rich, quinoa is a wonderful choice for people on a gluten-free diet or any generally healthy diet.

According to the nutrition facts stated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), 1 cup of cooked quinoa amounts to:

- 222 calories
- 39 grams (g) of carbs
- 8g of protein
- 6g of fat
- 5g of fiber
- 1g of sugar (6)

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What Are the Different Types of Quinoa?

Surprisingly, there are over 120 different varieties of quinoa as defined by the Whole Grains Council. Though the grain itself can manifest in a wide variety of colors (including purple!), the most common

quinoa colors found across American grocers are white (also considered ivory or yellow quinoa), red, and black. (3)

Interestingly enough, all three of these quinoa types cook and taste differently. While white quinoa has a fluffy post-cook texture, red and black quinoa are known to keep more of their shape and color after cooking. Red quinoa also has a heartier taste and chewier texture than the muted, bitter taste of white quinoa, while black quinoa tastes somewhat crunchy and slightly sweeter than either red or white.

After its popularity spike in 2014, quinoa was mainly sold in its natural seed form. But since then, many other adaptations of the product have also started to appear. Now, you can find [quinoa flour](#) for alternative baking and [quinoa flakes](#) (steamed quinoa rolled into thin, near transparent flakes for faster cooking) stocked on the shelves of every supermarket.

But that's not all. For the truly quinoa-obsessed, [quinoa chips](#), [quinoa pasta](#), and yes, even [quinoa chocolate](#) exist.

What Are the Possible Health Benefits of Quinoa?

The amount of research on quinoa has grown tremendously over the years, in part because of the 2014 hype, but in larger part due to the seed's continually recognized health benefits. The nutrient-rich pseudo-cereal is proposed to reduce the risk of a number of illnesses, and provide an ideal protein-packed substitute for gluten-free diets.

Whole grains like quinoa have been considered preventative for certain types of cancer due to their high levels of fiber. One study from *The Journal of Nutrition* suggests that the dietary fiber in whole grains may help lower [LDL, or "bad," levels of cholesterol](#), boost digestive health, and potentially lower the risk for some gastrointestinal cancers, such as colon cancer. (7)

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A study published in *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* found that consumers of magnesium-rich foods have a reduced risk of stroke. (8) Because of its high magnesium levels (a cup of cooked quinoa contains about one-third of your daily recommended magnesium intake suggested by the USDA), eating quinoa on a regular basis has been linked to improvement in heart health. (9)

Quinoa's magnesium also makes it a healthy food for people with or at risk for [type 2 diabetes](#) — the condition is frequently linked to magnesium deficit, according to an article published in the *World Journal of Diabetes*. (10)

Is Quinoa Better for You Than Rice?

Quinoa's nutritional profile is different from rice's. Compared with quinoa's nutritional stats (see above), according to the USDA, 1 cup of cooked long-grain brown rice contains about:

- 200 calories
- 43g carbs
- 4g protein
- 3g fat

- 3g fiber
- 0g sugar ([11](#))

So, which one is better for your health? Sharp says while it's important to enjoy "a wide variety of foods," she concludes that "quinoa has more fiber and protein and is also a complete protein. So head to head I would choose quinoa if it was an either-or choice."

Quinoa is also considered a safe gluten-free, whole-grain choice for people living with [celiac disease](#) — a condition in which your body cannot tolerate gluten. One study published in the *Journal of Human Nutrition and Dietetics* found that 44 percent of people living with celiac disease chose rice as their preferred grain. ([12](#)) When switching to naturally gluten-free grains like quinoa, the study found vast improvement in nutrients, most notably in protein levels, which skyrocketed from 11 g to 20.6 g.

Sharp also notes that quinoa isn't just great for people following a gluten-free diet. "It's a complete protein," she says, "making it a great option for vegetarians and vegans."

Can Eating Quinoa Help You Lose Weight?

Potentially.

Packed with protein and fiber, quinoa can certainly promote feelings of fullness — a notion Sharp backs up. "Quinoa is a low-glycemic-index carbohydrate since it's very rich in fiber and protein," she explains, "This means you'll feel fuller longer after consuming it, which may help you eat less over time."

But while quinoa has plenty of nutritional benefits, it is hardly considered a low calorie food source (just one cup of plain, cooked quinoa is 222 calories). So yes, in small quantities, quinoa can help you lose weight, but that is contingent on your portion consumption.

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Are There Any Side Effects to Eating Quinoa?

Quinoa, as it seems, really is as healthy as we hear, especially when you practice portion control. And Sharp says it is also incredibly safe to eat consistently. "The only likely side effect is just some stomach irritation as a result of the saponin (the natural coating) on the outside of the grains," she says.

Even so, this can be easily prevented before eating. "To reduce the likelihood of an irritation, you'll want to make sure to rinse the quinoa really well before use," Sharp recommends.

How Do You Cook Quinoa?

It all depends on the form of quinoa you're cooking. The natural grain itself takes about 15 minutes to cook, potentially more if you're making black quinoa. Quinoa flakes, on the other hand, take no more than a minute and a half to cook, making them a great on-the-go breakfast or snack.

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What Are the Best Ways to Use Quinoa?

Quinoa works nicely on its own, as a substitute for rice, or tossed with other ingredients. With its subtle flavor profile and fluffy texture, the whole grain is super easy to spice up with different flavors, or slip into other ingredients. Because of the mild taste, it can also be served savory or sweet.

Fun Quinoa Recipe Options

[Quinoa and Smoked Tofu Salad](#)

[Quinoa, Sweet Potato, and Walnut Veggie Burger](#)

[Kale and Quinoa Dolmades with Yogurt Dipping Sauce](#)

[Vegetarian Fried Quinoa and Spring Rolls](#)

[Black Bean, Mushroom, and Quinoa Stuffed Peppers Recipe](#)

Quinoa flakes are much thinner than quinoa, so they add crunchy textures when baked, and creamy smooth textures when cooked. All in all, they are wonderful for a quick oatmeal substitute, a thin coating on chicken or fish, or an alternative to oats in baked goods.

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