Whole lot of goodness

A wholegrain-rich diet can do you the power of good, writes BENJAMIN LONG.

In recent years there has been a lot of interest in super foods, exotically named berries from distant corners of the globe that are rich in vitamins, minerals and antioxidants.

While acai and goji berries will no doubt do you a power of good, arguably the most potent superfoods have been under our nose the whole time. Right there in your breakfast bowl even.

Professor Stephen Lillojo of the Illawarra Health and Medical Research Institute is lead author of a report, published in the journal Antioxidants, which analyses 11 major studies on the effects of consuming whole grains. He says there is compelling evidence they dramatically reduce the risks of developing diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, inflammatory disorders and bowel cancer. People who regularly eat whole grains are also less likely to be obese.

"We've got five major diseases where there is a clear cut reduction from eating whole grains," Lillojo says.

"For an increase of about 30 grams per day of whole grains the drop in heart disease was about 30 per cent — it was huge.

"Whole grains are grains such as wheat, rye, rice, corn, barley and oats that haven't had their bran and germ removed.

"While the digestive benefits of the roughage in whole grains has long been known, Lillojo says it is a layer of living cells, the "aleurone", that gives whole grains their potency.

"They are chock full of minerals, antioxidants and vitamins," he says. "This layer of cells is attached to bran and gets thrown out when grains are processed. When we chop up a milled grain we get white flour and that has got most of the minerals and vitamins removed.

"I was surprised by ... how potent whole grains are.

"The bran, which has almost all the minerals and vitamins, gets fed to the pigs and we eat the other stuff."

Although he has long been interested in nutrition, Lillojo did not expect such dramatic results.

"It was surprised by several things — how potent whole grains are and how rich a source of antioxidants they are," he says.

"The other surprise was how poorly this information had penetrated the nutrition literature — there are hundreds of papers about fibre, nothing about what the fibre means in terms of the aleurone cells and their contents."

The good news is it's very easy to add whole grains to our diets. The studies Lillojo analysed all looked at the effects of eating 40 to 50 grams of dry weight whole grain a day — the equivalent of three or four Weet-Bix, 10 Vita-Weats or a bowl and a half of cooked rolled oats.

"And if you have wholegrain bread for lunch and brown rice for dinner you have a lot more whole grain intake," Lillojo says.

With bread you need to check it has been made from wholemeal flour, as some breads have grains in them but have been made from white flour.