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All About Legumes, Peas, Beans and Lentils

The legume family includes dried beans, peas and lentils. Legumes make a perfect all season food, whether it is a hearty chilli on a winter's day or a fresh bean salad at a summer BBQ. They are nutritious, inexpensive and versatile. So go ahead, add beans, peas and lentils to your meals more often!

What makes legumes nutritious?

Legumes are an excellent plant-based food; providing protein, fibre, B vitamins and iron. That is why Canada's Food Guide recommends we include plant-based foods, like legumes, in our diet often.

Fibre is the part of the plant that we cannot digest. Fibre helps to lower blood cholesterol, maintain regular bowel movements and helps control blood sugar levels.

B vitamins are water soluble vitamins that help our body use fat, carbohydrates, and protein for fuel. Beans and lentils are especially rich in vitamin B6 and folate.

Iron is a mineral that is needed to make blood in your body. Iron comes in two forms, called heme and non-heme iron. Non-heme iron, which is found in plant foods like beans and lentils, is absorbed best when consumed with vitamin C rich foods like green peppers, tomatoes and citrus fruits. A bean chilli or lentil curry made with tomatoes is an excellent example.

The colourful world of legumes

There are over 20 different species of legumes varying in shape, texture, colour, and taste. Below is a list of the most common types of beans, peas and lentils and their suggested uses.

- Chickpeas or Garbanzo beans are medium sized, round beans that are beige and have a creamy texture. Chickpeas can be made into a spread, such as hummus, or added to soups, salads, and pasta dishes.
- Red kidney beans are medium sized, kidney-shaped beans that are dark red in colour. These beans have a soft texture that works well in soups, salads, chillies, or rice dishes.
- Black beans are medium sized, oval beans with black skin and white flesh. These beans are great when added to soups, salads, and rice.

- Black-eyed peas are medium sized, oval beans that are cream coloured with a black dot. They are usually served with rice or eaten as a side dish.
- Lentils are small, thin disk shaped seeds that can be green, brown, red, orange, or yellow in colour. The green and brown lentils hold their shape after cooking, while the red, orange and yellow lentils tend to dissolve. All lentils work well in salads, soups, curry dishes, dips and side dishes.
- Navy beans or Canadian white beans are small, white, oval beans used to make baked beans, soups, and stews.
- Cannellini beans are white kidney shaped beans popular in Italian dishes. They hold their shape well and can be used in salads, sauces and stews. Can't find these beans? Substitute Navy or Canadian white beans.
- Split peas are small circular peas that have split into two halves. These peas can be green, yellow or orange in colour. When cooked, these peas can become very soft making them great for soups or curry dishes.
- Mung beans are small, green legumes popular in Chinese cuisine. You will most often find them sprouted, and are commonly known as bean sprouts.
- Adzuki beans are small, round, reddish-brown legumes. They are commonly used to make desserts, such as red bean ice cream.

Did you know that peanuts are a legume?

While peanuts are a legume, they are more similar to tree nuts than other members of their family. The major difference between peanuts and other legumes are that peanuts have a higher fat content and a thinner skin around the seed providing a texture similar to nuts.

Should people with peanut allergies avoid legumes? No. Most people with peanut allergies do not have allergic reactions to dried beans, peas and lentils. Only peanuts need to be avoided.

How do I cook with beans, peas and lentils?

Beans and lentils come canned or dried.

To prepare canned beans, peas and lentils:

- Rinse well in cold water to remove excess salt and to make them easier to digest and less gas-producing.

- Because they are already cooked, just add to favourite dish after rinsing.
- Choose canned beans with no added sodium (salt) when possible.

To prepare dried beans, peas and lentils:

- Inspect for small rocks and poor quality beans.
- Wash and soak overnight in water to help them cook faster. Frequently change the soaking water to help make the legumes more digestible and less gassy.
- Once soaked, boil dried beans in fresh water.
- Gather and discard any foam that comes to the surface while cooking.
- Cook until tender. Depending on the bean, this may take 1-2 hours.
- You don't need to presoak dried lentils or split peas. They are smaller and cook faster.

Ten easy ways to include legumes in meals

1. Add a can of rinsed beans to homemade soups and stews.
2. Blend beans, garlic, lemon juice, and olive oil into a spread. Serve with veggies or whole wheat pita as a snack or add it to a veggie wrap. Chickpeas, red kidney beans, and black beans work well for this purpose.
3. Make lentil patties instead of hamburgers by substituting cooked lentils for beef. Serve on a whole wheat bun with yogurt and fresh herbs.
4. Have vegetarian tacos with beans, lettuce, tomato and avocado.
5. Create a vegetarian chilli by replacing the meat with a variety of beans.
6. Have canned baked beans in tomato sauce with toast for breakfast, lunch or dinner.
7. Purée any bean or lentil with a little water and add it to hamburger mixtures, casseroles, soups, stews or pasta sauces. This is a great way to add beans and lentils if you have picky eaters at home.
8. Marinate soybeans in vinegar, a little oil and your favourite spices and herbs. Serve on a cracker for an appetizer.
9. Make a lentil curry with you favourite vegetables and basmati rice.
10. Make a bean salad by combining rinsed canned beans with your favourite prepared vinaigrette, chopped red onion and peppers.

Visit Cookspiration.com for many dietitian created recipes featuring legumes, beans, peas and lentils.

How can a dietitian help?

A dietitian can suggest ways to incorporate more plant-based foods into your diet. They can work with you to make sure you are getting enough protein to meet your unique needs and goals. Dietitians consider your lifestyle, culture, health conditions, food skills, budget and preferences to give you a personalized plan. Most employee benefit plans cover dietitian services. Connect with a dietitian today!

Bottom line

Legumes are a great source of many essential nutrients like fibre, protein, B vitamins and iron. They come in many varieties and can be bought dried or canned.

Visit www.NutritionMonth2023.ca for more on how to connect with a dietitian and for trusted food and nutrition information.