

## Legumes: An alternative to meat

When was the last time you ate chickpeas, navy beans or black-eyed peas? Has it been days, weeks or even months?

Legumes are among the most versatile and nutritious foods available. They're good sources of protein and can be a healthy substitute for meat, which has more fat and cholesterol. So rediscover legumes and all they have to offer.

### The benefits of legumes

Legumes are in a class of vegetables that includes beans, peas and lentils. They grow as vines or bushes and develop pods that contain edible seeds. These seeds vary in size, shape and color. You can buy legumes in many forms. For example, green beans are the whole, fresh pods. Lima beans are fresh seeds, and black-eyed peas are examples of dried seeds. Seed sprouts, such as alfalfa sprouts and soybean sprouts, also are considered legumes.

Regardless of type, legumes typically are low in fat and high in protein, folate, potassium, iron and magnesium. Legumes also have phytochemicals — a group of compounds that may help prevent chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, cancer and diabetes. In addition, they're also a good source of fiber — the part of plant-based foods that your body doesn't digest. A diet high in fiber can help lower blood cholesterol levels, which can reduce your risk of heart disease.

Soybeans, one type of legume, are unique among beans because they contain all of the amino acids needed to make a complete protein, just like meat. They also contain isoflavones, a plant-based compound that may reduce the risk of some types of cancer.

Many healthy foods come from soybeans, including:

**Tofu.** Soybeans made into a curd using a process similar to that used to make cheese. Because it has a bland, spongy texture, tofu absorbs the flavor of other foods when you marinate or cook it, making it versatile. Tofu is available in several different textures, including firm, soft and silken.

**Soy milk.** A soy beverage made by grinding soybeans and mixing them with water to form a milk-like liquid. You can use soy milk as a replacement for cow's milk. Some soy milk is fortified with vitamins and minerals.

**Tempeh.** A food made from fermented soybeans. You can buy tempeh frozen or refrigerated in a cake-like form. It has a meaty texture and nutty flavor, so you can use it in your recipes as a substitute for meat.

**Soy flour.** A flour made from ground-roasted soybeans. Use soy flour in baked goods for added protein, fiber and phytochemicals.

Peanuts, commonly thought of as nuts, are actually part of the legume family along with beans and peas. Peanuts are good sources of protein, fiber, iron, magnesium, phosphorus, zinc, copper, niacin and folate. They're high in fat, although most of the fat is the healthier fat — monounsaturated fat. Peanuts can be eaten in moderation as a snack, or added to foods such as stir-fries.

## **Tips for selecting, storing and serving legumes**

Here are suggestions to help you select the highest quality legumes when you're shopping, ways to store them once you get home, and tips for preparing and serving these foods.

### **Selecting: What to look for**

**Shop in ethnic markets for less common legumes.** Indian markets, for example, may offer a wide selection of lentils, including pink- and orange-colored ones.

**Look for legumes of a uniform size and condition.** Similar-sized legumes cook more evenly. Be sure the legumes are free of mold and aren't cracked or broken.

**Choose legumes with a deep, almost glossy color.** Dry-looking or faded legumes indicate a longer storage time. The longer legumes are stored, the more likely the legumes won't taste fresh. In addition, legumes with cloudy surfaces may indicate the growth of mold. Purchase legumes from a source with high turnover.

**Buy legumes in bulk.** Buying legumes in large quantities often provides the freshest product at the greatest savings.

### **Storing: Where and why**

**Place dried legumes away from heat, light and moisture after purchase.** They keep well for up to one year in an airtight container.

**Keep unopened canned beans and peas in a cool, dry place.** They safely store for two to five years. Legumes canned at home keep up to a year.

### **Serving: Keep it safe and healthy**

**Sort and rinse legumes carefully before use.** Bags of legumes may include a few small stones, fibers, or misshapen or discolored items. Remove these before cooking.

**Soak large, dried legumes before cooking.** Beans and other large, dried legumes such as chickpeas and black-eyed peas require soaking in room-temperature water, a step that rehydrates them for more even cooking. Soak these types of legumes overnight. Once soaked, the beans are ready to cook. Split peas and lentils require no soaking. Another way to rehydrate beans is to place them in water, bring it to a boil for two to three minutes. Then, let the beans soak for at least one hour but not more than 24 hours. The longer the beans soak, the softer they get. Drain and rinse beans before eating or using in recipes.

**Use canned legumes for convenience.** Already prepared legumes are OK as is in dishes that don't require long simmering. Do rinse them well to remove any sodium added during processing.

### **Add more legumes to your diet**

Consider these ways to incorporate legumes into your meals and snacks:

- Prepare soups, stews and casseroles that feature legumes.
- Stir-fry tofu rather than meat in oriental dishes.
- Use pureed beans as the basis for dips and spreads.
- Replace eggs in baking recipes with 1 tablespoon of soy flour and 2 tablespoons of water for each egg.
- Add chickpeas or black beans to salads.
- Snack on a handful of soy nuts rather than on chips or crackers.
- Use tofu in place of half the ground beef for meatloaf or tacos.
- Add garbanzos or other canned beans to your salad. If you typically buy a salad at work and no beans are available, bring beans from home in a small container.

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