

Beans, Peas, and Lentils: Health Benefits¹

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Bean Basics

Bean, peas, and lentils are known collectively as legumes or pulses. Beans are great sources of many nutrients, including protein, fiber, and potassium.

Beans, peas, and lentils can be placed either in the vegetable group or the protein group of MyPlate (<http://www.choosemyplate.gov/index.html>). The food group you decide to place beans, peas, and lentils in depends on how successful you have been in meeting the suggested servings for the two groups. If you have consumed enough protein choices, then you can count beans, peas, and lentils in the vegetable group, and vice versa. For example, vegetarians, especially vegans, tend to consider legumes as their primary protein source. Meat eaters may choose to count legumes as vegetables because obtaining sufficient protein through meats and dairy is rather easy.

Beans, Peas, and Lentils and Nutrition

Fat content of beans, peas, and lentils is generally very low, and there is no cholesterol. Protein content is high, more than the amount of protein that is found in cereal grains. Obtaining protein from legumes is a healthy choice.

Another important component of beans, peas, and lentils is fiber. Fiber is a part of the diet that cannot be digested. Beans, peas, and lentils have about 15 g of dietary fiber in a one-cup serving and are especially high in insoluble fiber. Insoluble fiber bulks stool and decreases transit time

through the colon, thereby preventing constipation. The soluble fiber in beans, peas, and lentils is highly fermentable in the colon, which is thought to be health enhancing. However, fermentation also produces some gas (flatulence) that may cause discomfort for some individuals. Enzyme preparations containing alpha-galactosidases may prevent some of the gas production.

Beans, peas, and lentils are also rich sources of some vitamins and minerals, such as folate, iron, potassium, and magnesium. Folate and iron are important for preventing anemias, as well as maintaining many normal metabolic functions. Potassium and magnesium are important for muscle and nerve function.

Health Benefits

Cardiovascular Disease

Cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of death in developed countries. The saturated fat and cholesterol associated with animal proteins may contribute to high blood cholesterol and triglyceride levels, thus increasing cardiovascular disease risk. However, beans, peas, and lentils are cholesterol free and very low in fat. Research has shown that consumption of beans may reduce heart disease risk.

Cancers

Cancer is the second leading cause of death in North America. The fiber and folate found in beans, peas, and

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lentils may help to reduce the risk of various types of cancer.

Beans, peas, and lentils also contain significant levels of antioxidants and phytochemicals, which are substances associated with preventing chronic diseases like cancer.

Diabetes

The glycemic index (GI) is a scale that ranks foods based on how they raise blood glucose levels compared to glucose (a sugar) or white bread. Beans, peas, and lentils are foods that have a lower GI, much lower than most cereal foods. Low-GI foods provide a slower release of glucose into the blood, and thus decrease after-meal peaks in blood glucose levels. For people who have diabetes or are at risk of developing diabetes, low-GI foods are good choices. The fiber content of the beans, peas, and lentils helps slow the rate of digestion of the starch and absorption of glucose, which helps regulate blood glucose levels.

Celiac Disease

Individuals with celiac disease must follow a lifelong diet free of gluten. Gluten is a common name for certain proteins in wheat and wheat-related grains such as rye, barley, triticale, and spelt. Beans, peas, and lentils are gluten free and are an excellent starchy alternative to these foods, allowing people with celiac disease to also consume adequate amounts of fiber.

Where Can I Get More Information?

The family and consumer sciences agent at your county UF/IFAS Extension office may have more information and nutrition classes for you to attend. Also, a registered dietitian can provide you with reliable information. If you have concerns about your specific health condition, speak to your doctor.

Additional Resources

ChooseMyPlate.gov. <http://www.choosemyplate.gov/index.html>. Accessed January 16, 2013.

Mitchell, D. C, F. R. Lawrence, T. J. Hartman, and J. M. Curran. 2009. "Consumption of Dry Beans, Peas, and Lentils Could Improve Diet Quality in the US Population." *J Am Diet Assoc.* 109 (5): 909–913.