

Discovering Lentils

Before I discovered the convenience of fast-cooking lentils, I hardly ever made chili. I never remembered to soak the beans the night before. Now I can make chili in about an hour using dry lentils instead of beans.

Lentils and beans are both legumes, but unlike their bean cousins, lentils require no soaking before they're cooked. And in most instances they are ready to eat in thirty minutes or less. For various reasons, lentils are an excellent addition to food storage. They will keep for many years if stored in a tightly covered container in a cool, dry place.

Lentils have everything wise eaters are looking for. They are low in fat, sodium, cholesterol, and calories, yet they are high in fiber and complex carbohydrates. Lentils are a good source of vitamins A, B, and C. They are also high in potassium, vitamin E, calcium, phosphorus, and iron. They provide a complete protein if they are combined with nuts, seeds, eggs, rice, cereals, grains, or small amounts of animal protein such as dairy products or meat. The combination will supply all the amino acids necessary for a strong, healthy body.

You've probably heard of lentil soup, but there are many other delicious ways to use lentils. Combine lightly cooked lentils with chopped celery and onions, hard-boiled eggs, and salad dressing to make a great substitute

for potato salad. Use cooked lentils in place of half the amount of meat in casseroles and lasagna, or even sprinkle them on a pizza. Cooked and pureed lentils can be fried to make a delicious substitute for refried beans. Add lentil puree to drop cookies, cakes, and muffins to enrich the fiber, protein, and moisture content. Sprouted uncooked lentils add crunch to a salad. Lentils can be used in any recipe that calls for dry beans.

To cook lentils, rinse and drain them; then put them in a saucepan with twice the amount of water as lentils. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer fifteen minutes for salads, thirty minutes for main dishes, forty-five minutes for soups, or sixty minutes for purees.

To make chili, put all of your usual ingredients into a pot, omitting the beans. Add about 1 1/2 cups rinsed lentils for eight servings. Cook the chili for forty-five minutes or until the lentils are tender.

Easy to prepare and versatile, lentils are a practical, tasty addition to any diet.—Laurie H. Fifield, Moscow, Idaho

