

The Benefits of Beans

A fresh perspective of these nutritional superstars

Beans and other legumes such as lentils and peas are powerhouses of protein, folic acid, iron, and zinc, as well as a good source of low-glycemic carbohydrates. Rich in soluble and insoluble fiber, beans can help lower cholesterol, reduce colon cancer risk, and contain beneficial phytonutrients. “Beans are readily available, inexpensive, and adapt to a wide range of cuisines,” says Wendy Kohatsu, MD, chef and director of the Integrative Medicine Fellowship at Santa Rosa Family Medicine Residency in California. Some people avoid eating them because they can cause stomach upset and gas, but Dr. Kohatsu offers creative ideas for incorporating different types of beans into your diet, as well as strategies to minimize digestive problems.

BEAN BASICS

Aim for one to two servings of beans and legumes daily. Add to soups, salads, and sandwiches, or purée for dips.

Try experimenting Prepare hummus with puréed edamame rather than chickpeas and sprinkle with Japanese seven-spice powder, make Indian dal with mung beans in place of lentils, or kick up black beans and rice with heirloom chilies.

Canned vs. dried Canned beans are easy to use and shelf stable, but can be high in sodium—rinse well before using to lower sodium and remove indigestible starches found in the liquid. Can linings may also contain the potentially harmful chemical bisphenol-A (BPA). Dried beans cost less, offer greater variety, give more control over sodium, and are able to be cooked in digestion-friendly ways.

TUMMY-FRIENDLY TIPS

Cook smart Discarding soaking water significantly improves digestibility. Slowly cook, skimming off foam, until beans are very tender. Try adding a piece of kombu (seaweed) to the cooking water; its enzymes help make beans more digestible and kombu eventually dissolves

without affecting taste or texture. Cooking with digestion-supporting herbs like epazote, fennel seeds, and ginger helps, too. Many raw beans contain natural toxins, so fully cook all beans before eating.

Get fresh As beans age, their natural starches convert to indigestible forms. If possible, buy dried beans from a farmers’ market or a retailer with high turnover.

Sprout your beans Sprouting releases some indigestible starches. Cover beans with room-temperature water. Change the water daily for three days, or until white sprouts emerge. (If the beans smell rancid, discard them.) Rinse well and, leaving sprouts intact, cook like regular beans, only reduce the cooking time.

Take digestive enzymes Dr. Kohatsu recommends brands that contain multiple enzymes such as Essential Enzymes from Source Naturals.

TYPES TO TRY

Familiar black beans, cannellini, lima beans, and edamame are excellent choices. Or try these lesser-known beans, available at supermarkets, natural food stores, farmers’ markets, and online.

Adzuki These quick-cooking, high-protein, small, red beans have a sweet, nutty flavor, and contain easily digestible sugars. They’re popular in Asian cuisines and you can add them to vegetarian chili.

Anasazi With a mild and sweet flavor, these speckled heirloom beans are great in soups and Southwestern recipes instead of pintos. For more about Anasazi and other heirloom beans, visit these helpful sites nativeseeds.org and ranchogordo.com.

Fresh fava During spring to early summer, fresh fava beans are creamy, full-bodied, and slightly sweet. Try in stews, salads, or the Egyptian dish “*ful medames*.”

Mung These tiny beans sprout readily, cook quickly, and are easily digestible. They work well in Asian dishes.

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This monthly column on nutrition is produced in collaboration with the Arizona Center for Integrative Medicine. For more information, visit its website at integrativemedicine.arizona.edu.