

Take a Pulse to Boost Nutritional Value of Meals

by Janet Hackert, *Regional Nutrition and Health Education Specialist*

As cool fall weather sets in, preferences may turn to meals that warm, like a nice bowl of hot lentil soup. Lentils and other pulses are a tasty, inexpensive, versatile source of nutrients that may have heart health benefits as well. Take a pulse and boost the nutritional value of meals.

Pulses, or edible seeds of plants in the legume family, include dried beans such as kidney beans, black beans, and adzuki beans; dried peas such as chick peas, black-eyed peas and cowpeas; and a variety of lentils. Pulses are high in fiber, protein, iron, phosphorous, zinc, folate and other B vitamins. They are also low in fat and calories.

Dried beans, peas and lentils are a relatively inexpensive source of protein and can be fixed in a variety of ways. For example, they can be cooked and substituted for hamburger. Just as kidney beans are used in chili, beans can be mashed or used whole and added to burgers, substituted for all or part of the hamburger in casseroles, or used as filler in meatloaf or other dishes. They can also be used on their own in soup or stew, in stir fry or with greens in a salad. For a recipe for slow cooker pinto beans, go to MissouriFamilies.org.

To cook dried pulses, there are several options. Utah State University Extension gives the following instructions. Soak beans overnight in three times the volume of water as beans. Rinse, place in a stock pot and cover with water. Cook on low heat until tender, 2-4 hours. Another method, offered by MU Extension Nutrition Specialist Tammy Roberts in a MissouriFamilies.org article is to put them in a saucepan, cover with water, bring to a boil, and simmer for 10 minutes. Rinse, cover with six cups of water per pound (or 2 cups) of pulses and cook in a crockpot on low for 6-12 hours. A faster option is to use a microwave. For instructions, go to MU Extension's Missouri Families web site at MissouriFamilies.org.

According to a report in the August 2014 issue of Tufts University Health and Nutrition Letter, studies show that consuming just ½ to ¾ cup of dried beans, peas or lentils may decrease the unhealthy LDL cholesterol by “a modest but significant 5%.” This is “similar to what the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute says can be achieved by adding 5-10 grams per day of soluble fiber (3%-5%) or losing 10 pounds if you are overweight (5%-8%).” It is not clear, though, if this health benefit is because of the pulses themselves or what they replaced in the diet. Either way, the health benefit may be worth making the change.

Look for ways to make pulses a part of a healthy eating plan, and enjoy their flavor inexpensively while benefiting from their boost of nutrients.

For more information on using pulses or any other topic, contact me, Janet Hackert, at 660-425-6434 or HackertJ@missouri.edu or your local University of Missouri Extension office.

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