

Habits for a Healthy Life

Healthy Habit #10:

Eat your Legumes!

By Marianne Herr-Paul, D.O.

“Beans, Beans, So Good for Your Heart...”

Legumes. What are they? They are the dried fruit of many plants, including beans, peanuts, lentils, and peas.

Legumes are among the most versatile and nutritious foods available. They are typically *low in fat, contain no cholesterol, and are high in folate, potassium, iron and magnesium.* While part of the vegetable family, legumes are higher in protein than most vegetables. (Factoid: also, their high nitrogen content contributes to the fixation of nitrogen in the soil, thus decreasing the amount of fertilizer farmers need to add (if they rotate a legume crop every few years in their fields).

Legumes are good for losing weight — why? Because *they are high in fiber and protein;* the fiber helps to slow the absorption of sugar (glucose). Soluble fiber (found in fruits, oats, barley and legumes) may also be beneficial for lower cholesterol. Diets higher in fiber have been associated with weight loss, or maintenance of healthy weight.

Total daily fiber recommended is 30 grams, with the majority coming from soluble fiber. One-half cup of cooked lentils has 8 grams of total fiber (one gram of soluble fiber); ½ cup of navy or kidney beans has 6 grams of total fiber, (2 and 3 grams respectively of soluble fiber). Compare this with one slice of whole wheat bread, which typically has 2 grams of fiber, but only trace soluble fiber.

While this article is about grains, you should know that other good sources of fiber are fruits (one large pear = 5 gm total fiber, 3 of soluble fiber), whole grains (1/2 cup cooked barley has 4 gm total fiber, one of soluble fiber), and vegetables (1/2 cup cooked carrots = 3 gm total, 1 gm soluble fiber, or ½ cup cooked winter squash = 3 gm total, 2 gm soluble fiber).

Beans come in many shapes, colors and flavors: just a sampling includes the small very high protein “adzuki bean” which cooks up almost as quickly as the flatter green or brown lentil; the black “turtle bean,” which makes a fabulous bean paste, or puréed makes a hearty soup; more common to Pennsylvania are the “navy,” “red kidney beans” and “butter beans” (dried lima beans so great in succotash and soups). “Chick peas,” also known as “garbanzo beans,” show up blended in a high protein snack called “hummus” or “hummous,” or whole on salad bars. In fact, while we’re on that subject, cooked legumes which are then marinated in salad dressings, or added on top of your lovely pile of fresh salad greens, add a fabulous protein to your salad.

Soybeans

Another highly nutritious and delicious protein is the soybean, which can be prepared in a wide variety of ways. However, there are two very important things to remember about soybeans:

One: make sure the soy is from “non-genetically modified soybeans” or “non-GMO”, which is always mentioned on non-GMO products, but not mentioned on products which come from genetically modified soybeans. The safety of GM (genetically modified) foods has not been fully determined for human beings, so for now I would avoid them.

Two: the best forms of soy are those which have been fermented, as this makes the soy more easily digested. Examples are tofu (bean-curd), tempeh (a stronger flavored bean-curd), miso paste (to be used in soups), and soy sauce (also called tamari sauce).

While whole fresh green soybeans are delicious, you can help them be more easily digested by adding soy sauce (tamari sauce) after steaming the whole fresh soybeans, in their pods, in water. Prepared this way, they are known as “edamame” (eat-a-mom-may). Just squirt the savory cooked buds into your mouth straight from the pod.

More legume benefits

Recent studies have shown that baked beans, lentils, and chickpeas, eaten over four times a week, improve the ability of blood to flow through arteries, especially in the legs, apparently by 20 percent. This was enough to help people who had pain on walking, to be able to get up and start walking again, thus improving other aspects of their health as well.

Thus, with high protein and fiber, but no cholesterol, legumes are a good substitute for red meat (which is high in cholesterol).

Eating legumes four times a week has been associated with lowered risk for heart disease, one reason being that legumes are rich in folate, which helps to lower homocysteine levels. High levels of homocysteine are associated with heart disease.

For the next 21 days, try substituting legumes for meat in four meals a week. Recipes for delicious ways to prepare and use legumes in your diet will be in the next edition of this article.

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