Looking for a tasty, inexpensive meat alternate that is easy to prepare? Dry beans and lentils are the answer. Members of the legume family, they are naturally low in fat and can provide many needed nutrients. One cup of lentils has about 200 calories and contains protein, iron, B vitamins, and only a trace of fat. Legumes also are a good source of fiber.

Beans are a less expensive source of protein than animal protein sources like meat or cheese. Legumes offer the most protein value when combined in a meal or recipe with grains, such as corn, rice, wheat, or oats. Beans also are a good protein source when eaten with small amounts of animal protein like cheese, lean meat, or a glass of milk.

Cans of kidney beans, garbanzo beans, Great Northern beans, and other legumes are convenient to use. Dry beans require pre-soaking, but planning ahead will keep this from being a problem. Choose one of these methods:

1. Overnight – Wash, sort, and place beans in water. Allow four cups of water for each cup of beans. Cover and let stand 8 hours or overnight.
2. Quick – Bring water and beans to a boil and cook two minutes. Cover, remove from heat, and let stand one hour.

After pre-soaking, gentle boiling for one to two hours will soften most beans, although the time will vary with the age and type of legume. Beans can be cooked in a pressure cooker in just three to ten minutes. Be sure to follow directions carefully. Do not fill the cooker more than one-third full of beans and water. The beans will expand and foam could clog the vent.

Lentils are the easy-to-prepare legume. They do not require pre-soaking and they cook in 30 minutes. Lentils impart a mild, nutty flavor to salads, soups, and main dishes. Add pureed lentils to dips or to stuffed peppers. Use them as a meat extender in meat loaf or patties.

If you want to add acid ingredients like tomatoes or vinegar, partially cook the dry beans or lentils first. Acid delays the softening process and increases cooking time. Adding baking soda hastens softening, but more than one-eighth teaspoon per cup of beans can destroy thiamin (Vitamin B1). It also may cause mushiness and an off-flavor.

One cup of dried beans makes about two cups of cooked beans. Many bean recipes make several servings. If you are cooking for one or two people, cut the recipe in half or plan to freeze leftovers. Soups and main dishes containing legumes freeze well; however, the beans should be slightly under-cooked so they will not become mushy when reheated.

To save on preparation time, a quantity of beans could be prepared at the beginning of a week. Store them tightly covered in the refrigerator for up to five days. Beans are then ready to quickly use in a variety of ways.
LENTIL SALAD

1 quart water
1 cup dried lentils
1 small bay leaf
1/4 cup fresh chopped onion
2 tablespoons fresh chopped parsley
2 cloves garlic, finely chopped
1/2 cup canned whole tomatoes, drained and chopped
1/4 cup diced carrots
1 tablespoon red wine vinegar
1/2 teaspoon Worchester sauce
1/8 teaspoon Tabasco sauce
1/4 teaspoon pepper
1/2 teaspoon salt (optional)
3 tablespoons oil

Bring water to a boil in a two-quart saucepan. Add lentils and bay leaf. Reduce heat and simmer covered for 20 to 30 minutes or until lentils are tender but not mushy. Drain well and discard bay leaf. Transfer lentils to a serving bowl and stir in onions, parsley, garlic, tomatoes, and carrots. To make dressing, combine vinegar, Worchester sauce, Tabasco, pepper, and oil. Pour dressing over lentil mixture, and toss gently but thoroughly. Cover tightly with foil or plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 30 minutes. Yield: 4 servings.


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