load up on lentils
The forgotten superfood

Matthew Kadey, MSc, RD | photos Scott Yavis | styling Lawren Moneta
Although often forgotten in the discussion of superfoods, lentils are a nutritional fountain of youth and can be worked into a number of comforting dishes with delicious results.

It's hard to find a reason why you shouldn't eat plenty of lentils, given their inherent earthy, vitamin-laden yumminess. Still skeptical? Here are nine reasons why you should load up on these unsung heroes of the bulk bins.

1. **Trim your waistline:** one cup (250 mL) of cooked lentils contains a mere 230 calories, 1 g of fat, and a whopping 16 g of dietary fibre. On top of keeping you more regular than Norm from Cheers, several studies suggest that those who consume the most fibre are more likely to tip the scale in the right direction. Fibre slows digestion and tends to fill you up, taking a sledgehammer to hunger pangs.

2. **Slash cholesterol:** a 2010 European Journal of Nutrition study reported that subjects who consumed four servings per week of cooked chickpeas, beans, peas, or lentils for two months experienced improvements in cholesterol levels. Lentils are sky-high in soluble fibre. As soluble fibre enters the digestive tract, it absorbs water and dissolves into a viscous gel that reduces the absorption of cholesterol into the bloodstream.

3. **Drop blood pressure:** lentils are abundant in potassium. A study of more than 17,000 adults in the Archives of Internal Medicine reported that higher potassium intakes are associated with significantly lower blood pressure numbers. High blood pressure is a leading risk factor for stroke.

4. **Dodge diabetes:** when Canadian scientists reviewed data from 41 studies, they determined that consuming a diet rich in lentils can lead to long-term improvements in blood sugar numbers and a lower risk for diabetes. Lentils can lower the overall glycemic index of the diet, resulting in fewer blood sugar spikes.

5. **Fight cancer:** very few foods contain more folate than mighty lentils. In addition to helping prevent birth defects, this B vitamin has been shown to confer protection against several forms of cancer including pancreatic, colon, and bladder. The body uses folate to properly form and replicate DNA, and researchers believe low levels could contribute to cancer by making genetic mutations more likely.

6. **Boost energy:** lentils are chockablock with iron, which is necessary for the delivery of oxygen from the lungs to the brain and muscles. So coming up short can leave you lethargic with brain fog.

7. **Budget protein:** with 18 g of protein per cup and costing only about $1.50 per pound from bulk bins, lentils are a frugal protein alternative to beef, chicken, and fish.

8. **Antioxidant punch:** when we think of antioxidants, what comes to mind is luminous fruits and vegetables, but it turns out lentils contain an abundance of antioxidants, according to an International Journal of Food Science & Technology study. Antioxidants help mop up cell-damaging free radicals that initiate several chronic diseases.

9. **Get dinner on the table faster:** unlike their bean counterpart, lentils don't require an annoying pre-soak and they cook in half the time.

**ALL DRIED UP**

Although it's tempting to opt for more convenient canned lentils, dried lentils have much better flavour and texture. Canned lentils often come with high sodium numbers and are packed in tins coated with bisphenol A (BPA). A 2010 study reported that US adults with high urinary concentrations of BPA are more likely to develop heart disease and diabetes.

Pick over dry lentils before cooking them to remove any small stones that can land you in the dentist chair. Then rinse and place them in a pot with roughly 2 1/2 to 3 cups (625 to 750 mL) of water or broth for each cup of lentils.

To avoid overcooking firmer lentils, start tasting after about 15 to 20 minutes. Lentils for salads should be less mushy than those meant for soups.

When cooking, it's best to avoid non-enamelled cast-iron or aluminum cookware because these materials tend to slow cooking and adversely alter the colour of the lentils. Add salt and acids such as vinegar, wine, tomatoes, or lemon juice only after the lentils are tender as these can lengthen cooking time by hardening the lentils.

Cooked lentils can be stored in the refrigerator for up to one week or in an airtight container in the freezer for six months. 📃
Apple Lentil Muffins

With lentil purée and flaxseed, you'd be hard pressed to find a muffin with more fibre. If you can't find whole wheat pastry flour, use equal parts regular whole wheat and all-purpose flours.

Preheat oven to 350°F (180°C).

In medium saucepan, combine lentils and 2 cups (500 mL) water. Bring to a boil, reduce heat and simmer until lentils break down and most of the water is absorbed, about 10 minutes. Mash lentils until smooth and set aside to cool.

In large bowl, combine flour, flaxseed, walnuts, baking powder, baking soda, cinnamon, cloves, and salt.

Add egg, sugar, oil, and apple to lentil puree and mix well. Combine wet and dry ingredients and mix just until all the flour is incorporated. Divide mixture among 12 greased muffin cups and bake for 18 minutes, or until golden and a toothpick inserted into the middle of a muffin comes out clean.

Makes 12 muffins.

EACH MUFFIN CONTAINS: 227 calories; 8 g protein; 9 g total fat (1 g sat. fat, 0 g trans fat); 32 g carbohydrates; 8 g fibre; 57 mg sodium
Preheat oven to 350 F (180 C).

In medium saucepan, bring lentils and 2 1/2 cups (625 mL) water to a boil. Reduce heat to low and simmer covered until lentils are tender, about 25 minutes.

In separate small saucepan, bring quinoa and 1 cup (250 mL) water to a boil. Reduce heat to low and simmer covered until water is absorbed, about 10 minutes.

In sauté pan, heat vegetable oil over medium. Add onion, carrot, and mushrooms to the pan and cook until vegetables have softened, about 5 minutes. Stir in red pepper and continue to cook for 3 minutes.

Remove vegetables from pan and toast pecan pieces until browned and fragrant, about 4 minutes, stirring frequently.

In large bowl, add all the ingredients and mix well. Transfer mixture to loaf pan and press down until even. Bake until firm and golden brown, about 50 minutes. Let rest for 10 minutes before unmoulding and slicing.

Serves 4.

EACH SERVING CONTAINS: 461 calories; 21 g protein; 17 g total fat (2 g sat. fat, 0 g trans fat); 59 g carbohydrates; 18 g fibre; 116 mg sodium
Lentil Tapenade

This is a wonderful nutrient-dense spread for sandwiches and crackers or a dip for crudités. Leftover tapenade can be frozen for future use.

2/3 cup (160 mL) beluga or brown/green lentils
3/4 cup (180 mL) chopped kalamata olives
2 Tbsp (30 mL) extra-virgin olive oil
2 cloves garlic, chopped
Zest of 1 lemon
Juice of 1/2 lemon, about 1 Tbsp (15 mL)
Salt and pepper to taste
1/2 cup (125 mL) parsley, chopped
2 Tbsp (30 mL) capers, drained

In medium saucepan, combine lentils and 2 1/2 cups (625 mL) water. Bring to a boil, reduce heat, and simmer until tender, about 25 minutes.

In food processor add cooked and drained lentils, olives, olive oil, garlic, lemon zest, lemon juice, salt, and pepper. Process until smooth.

Taste the purée and add more olives if you prefer a stronger olive flavour. Add parsley and capers, and pulse a few times until combined.

Makes 12 servings.

EACH SERVING CONTAINS: 80 calories; 3 g protein; 5 g total fat (1 g sat. fat, 0 g trans fat); 8 g carbohydrates; 4 g fibre; 262 mg sodium
Roasted Butternut Lentil Soup

Preheat oven to 400 F (200 C). Place squash on baking sheet lined with foil and toss with 1 Tbsp (15 mL) vegetable oil. Bake for 25 minutes, or until squash becomes tender, stirring halfway.

Meanwhile, in medium saucepan, combine lentils, turmeric, and 2 1/2 cups (625 mL) water. Bring to a boil, reduce heat, and simmer covered for 10 to 15 minutes, or until lentils begin to break down.

Clean squash seeds of pulp and dry well with a paper towel. Toast seeds along with salt to taste in dry skillet over medium until golden, about 3 to 4 minutes, stirring frequently.

Add the cooked squash to the lentils and mash with fork or potato masher.

In large saucepan, heat 1 Tbsp (15 mL) oil over medium. Add cumin seeds and heat for 1 minute. Add onion, garlic, and ginger and cook until onion softens and becomes translucent, about 5 minutes. Stir in garam masala and cook for 1 minute. Add lentil squash purée, salt, pepper, and 3 cups (750 mL) water or vegetable stock. Bring to a boil and simmer for 10 minutes. Add more liquid if desired. Stir in lemon juice.

Puree in a blender in batches. Ladle into serving bowls and garnish with toasted squash seeds and cilantro.

Serves 6.

EACH SERVING CONTAINS: 229 calories; 10 g protein; 6 g total fat (1 g sat. fat, 0 g trans fat); 37 g carbohydrates; 12 g fibre; 8 mg sodium
Lentil lexicon

LENTILS COME IN A VARIETY OF HUES, ALL WORTH EXPLORING.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Great in</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>beluga lentils</td>
<td>firm and chewy with a strong earthy flavour; glistens like beluga caviar once cooked</td>
<td>roasted root vegetable medleys, braised cabbage dishes, salads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brown/green lentils</td>
<td>mild, meaty flavour and slightly chewy texture</td>
<td>lentil and vegetable soups, casseroles, salads, stews, veggie burgers</td>
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<tr>
<td>French green lentils</td>
<td>rich, peppery flavour; stay firm when cooked</td>
<td>salads, tabbouleh, pilafs</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Puy lentils)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>red lentils</td>
<td>nutty and slightly sweet; commonly used in Middle Eastern or Indian food dishes; disintegrate easily when cooked</td>
<td>Indian dals, baked goods, creamy soups, spreads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>white lentils (ivory lentils)</td>
<td>mild taste and soft texture; these are skinned and split black lentils</td>
<td>stews, soups, casseroles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yellow lentils</td>
<td>slightly nutty flavour; don't hold their shape when cooked</td>
<td>Indian dals, curry and squash soups, spreads, baked goods</td>
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Matthew Kadey, MSc, RD, is an Ontario-based dietician and food writer. Find him at wellfedman.com or muffintinmania.com.