

Lentil is a lentil is a lentil? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I eat lots of different kinds of lentils but don't know much about their individual nutritional properties. Are certain kinds of lentils healthier than others? What are the different calorie and protein figures for different kinds of lentils?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Lentils are small, round, lens shaped edible legumes produced in various colors and sizes. They're celebrated for their long shelf life, low cost, and excellent nutritional content. Specifically, lentils contain low sodium and cholesterol, while maintaining highly beneficial nutrients such as thiamin, phosphorus, copper, vitamin C, folate, iron, manganese, and dietary fiber. Better yet, because lentils generally don't contain sulfur, they don't tend to cause gastrointestinal distress like many other legumes (e.g., beans). The variety in lentils exists mostly among their color, size, shape, and flavor — nutritional content remains fairly consistent across different lentil varieties.

There's an array of lentils available on the market, including brown, yellow, red, black, and green varieties. Each type may have a slightly different flavor profile and are prepared differently according to taste or needs, but the general nutritional content doesn't seem to vary too much. The slight nutritional differences between various types of lentils are mostly a product of preparation. For example, whole green and brown lentils contain more fiber than hulled red and black ones; raw lentils are slightly higher in protein than cooked ones; and raw sprouted lentils may be higher in carbohydrates than other varieties. Any lentil variety, when added to foods or prepared as a main dish, serves as a good source of protein and fiber.

Many vegetarians and vegans love lentils for their high protein content. As animal proteins become less popular, there's been a growing interest in seeking alternative sources of protein from grains and legumes. Lentil proteins are promising substitutes due to their wide variety of functional properties, despite the fact that they're an incomplete protein ^[2]. Incomplete proteins come from plant-based foods, such as grains, legumes (other than soy), and vegetables. Despite being "incomplete," they're the third most protein dense legume out there, trumped only by soybeans and hemp. Although lentils are a wonderful source of incomplete protein, when paired

with other foods (such as grains), a complete protein may be created, providing all the essential amino acids a person may need. The foods don't need to be eaten at the same exact time in order to be used by the body to build protein, as was once thought. The complementary proteins could be consumed within 24 hours of each other to create the complete protein. In addition to incorporating whole lentils into meals, the food industry is looking into developing new approaches to increase the use of lentil-based products. An example of such an approach is the extraction of fiber, starch, and protein from the lentil for use in newer food products such as non-dairy milks.

Research has shown that eating lentils may be good for health. In fact, there's been an increase in scientific interest in the health benefits of lentils as a functional food because of their high nutrition value, antioxidant properties, and other bioactive compounds [3]. Studies have shown a reduction in the incidence of diseases such as diabetes, cancer, and obesity due to the bioactive compounds found in lentils. In addition to being a good protein source, they're low in fat and sodium, but high in potassium and iron.

Lentils appear to be a nutrient powerhouse, complementary to most patterns of eating. If you have other questions or want more tips on incorporating lentils or other legumes into your daily eating habits, consider speaking with your health care provider or a registered dietitian!

Alice!

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