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[Home](#) > Refried and other canned beans: Healthy or not?

Refried and other canned beans: Healthy or not? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

Two questions:

- 1) How does one know when they need a nutritionist?
- 2) If refried beans are so fatty and bad, does this mean that regular out of a can beans are too?

Thanks,
Confused by food

Answer

Dear Confused by food,

Although confusion about food is a very good reason to see a nutritionist, or a registered dietitian (RD), you don't have to wait until you have a question or for something to be wrong in order to make an appointment. They can help with questions as basic as the one you posed about refried beans, or any other food fallacies or facts that pique your interest. They are trained to assess your everyday diet and eating patterns, work with you to make simple changes that would lead to healthier choices and lifestyle, and provide you with additional resources to help you make more informed decisions about eating. Your health care provider will likely be able to provide a referral for you.

Now to re-hash the situation about refried beans: Even with the word *fried* in their name, refried beans can actually be incorporated into a healthy diet. These beans get a bad reputation because they are usually cooked with a good amount of fat. But, it's best not to demonize fats—they're a necessary part of a healthy diet. That being said, not all fats are created equal. Saturated fats, such as the ones often found in animal fats, may raise LDL cholesterol levels and increase the risk of certain cancers. On the other hand, mono- and polyunsaturated fats, such as the ones in olive, canola and vegetable oils, nuts and nut butters, and oil fish raise HDL cholesterol and have other health benefits [2]. Refrieds may be prepared with either type of fat, so it's worth either reading the label at your grocery store or asking your server when dining out what type the beans contain. Due to the increasing health consciousness of customers, many restaurants are now using regular vegetable oil to prepare refried beans.

As for other canned beans, it depends whether you're talking about refried beans in a can, or plain beans. Again, it's always a good idea to read the label to find out what type of oil or fat was used. Plain beans are usually cooked in water or chicken broth with a bit of spices and are generally low in fat. It's worth noting that, if you're also looking to reduce your sodium intake, canned beans can have a bit of sodium in them. In order to decrease the sodium content, it also helps to rinse the beans before cooking or serving. Often, you can purchase low-sodium varieties of beans at your grocery as well. Generally speaking though, beans (when prepared in a healthy way) are a good vegetarian source of protein, fiber, antioxidants and vitamins, making them an overall incredibly nutritious food.

Hopefully this has cleared up the beans and nutrition situation and will lead you to many enjoyable meals.

Alice!

Category:

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Student Health Service Nutrition Services (CUIMC) [14]

Medical Services (CUIMC) [15]

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Footer menu

- ▼ Contact Alice!
 - Content Use
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Links

- [1] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/refried-and-other-canned-beans-healthy-or-not>
- [2] <http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/good-vs-bad-fats-0>
- [3] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/nutrition-physical-activity>
- [4] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/optimal-nutrition>
- [5] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/food-thought>
- [6] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/healthy-eating>
- [7] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/first-year-fifteen-%E2%80%94-can-it-be-avoided>
- [8] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/beans-cause-gassy-discomfort-%E2%80%94-any-relief>
- [9] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/managing-high-blood-pressure-through-diet>
- [10] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/good-vs-bad-fats-0>
- [11] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/complete-and-incomplete-proteins-grains-and-vegetables>
- [12] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/columbia-health-nutrition-services-morningside>
- [13] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/medical-services-morningside>
- [14] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/student-health-service-nutrition-services-cuimc>
- [15] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/medical-services-cuimc>