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 plants that are produced in various colors and sizes. They are celebrated for their long shelf life, low cost, and excellent nutritional content. Specifically, they are low in sodium and cholesterol, yet high in 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 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.

Many different lentil varieties are sold in grocery stores in the United States. The following are the most widely available lentils on the market:

- **Brown Lentils**: the most common lentil in the United States features a mildly earthly flavor profile and smooth texture.
- **Yellow Lentils**: sweet and nutty, yellow lentils break down quickly when cooked and are used as a thickening agent in many recipes, such as Indian dal (yum!).
- **Red Lentils**: a light red to orange color, red lentils are actually a split and hulled version of the yellow lentil, with the shortest cooking time of all varieties.
- **Black Lentils**: dark on the outside, black lentils contain a light, creamy flesh and resemble beluga caviar when cooked.
- **Green Lentils**: firm and flavorful, green lentils don’t break down easily with stirring or mixing, making them ideal for salads and pilafs.
- **French Green Lentils or Puy Lentils**: a smaller and darker type of green lentil, French green lentils are firm in texture and distinguished by their lightly speckled surface.

Many vegetarians and vegans love lentils for their high protein content. In fact, lentils are the third most protein dense legume out there, trumped only by soybeans and hemp. Although lentils are a wonderful source of protein, it’s important to note that they’re an incomplete protein.
[2], meaning that one should also consume grains in order to provide the body with all essential amino acids to create a complete protein. The lentils and grains don't need to be eaten at the same exact time in order to be used by the body to build protein, as once was thought. The complementary proteins just need to be consumed within 24 hours of each other. Incomplete proteins come from plant-based foods, such as beans, rice, grains, legumes (other than soy), and vegetables.

The slight nutritional differences between various types of lentils are mostly a product of the manner in which the lentils are prepared. 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.

Lentils are a fantastic addition to any diet. Talk to your health care provider or a registered dietician for more tips on nutrition!

Alice!
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