



MEALTIME MEMO

May
2025

LEGUMES

(BEANS, PEAS, AND LENTILS)

Did you know a simple bag of beans could be the key to powering up your CACFP menus? Legumes like beans, peas, and lentils are versatile, affordable superfoods. Regularly consuming legumes may help reduce the risk of obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and certain cancers. Including them as part of your menu can positively impact the health of the children in your care. This *Mealtime Memo* defines legumes, reviews their nutritional benefits, and provides ideas for incorporating them into menus.



What are Legumes?

While often used interchangeably, the terms legumes, pulses, and beans have different meanings. A *legume* is a plant that produces seeds in pods. A *pulse* is the dried, edible seed of a legume. It consists of:

- Beans: (e.g., adzuki, black, cannellini, fava, kidney, lima, navy, pinto)
- Peas (e.g., black-eyed peas, garbanzo beans [chickpeas], split peas)
- Lentils (e.g., brown, green, red/yellow)



Nutritional Benefits of Legumes

There are three key nutritional benefits:

- Legumes provide a range of essential nutrients for children to grow and develop. As part of an overall healthy diet, they may help reduce the risk of developing chronic diseases.
- Legumes are rich in iron, potassium, folate, and zinc, naturally low in fat and sodium, and free of saturated fat and cholesterol.
- They are also an excellent source of fiber, helping children feel full longer and is important for gut health.



Meat Alternate or Vegetable?

The nutrition found in legumes is similar to foods in the Vegetables and Meat Alternates components in the CACFP.

- Like vegetables, legumes are excellent fiber, folate, and potassium sources.
- Like meat alternates, legumes are excellent plant protein, iron, and zinc sources.

Legumes can be served as a meat alternate or vegetable, but not as both in the same meal.

Green string beans, green peas, and snap peas are not considered legumes or pulses. These beans and peas are harvested while still immature, with the entire pod being eaten. They can only be credited as vegetables, not as meat alternates.



Forms of Legumes

In addition to the many types, legumes are available in three forms:

- **Dried** legumes require soaking and longer cooking times.
- **Canned**, precooked legumes are efficient options (no soaking needed) to simplify recipes and reduce cooking times.
- **Frozen** legumes are a fast and easy option for menu planning.

Below are the pros and cons of dried, canned, and frozen options that may help decide which form to purchase and use.

Pros and Cons of Different Forms of Legumes

	Pros	Cons
Dried	• Easy to store • Long shelf life • Least processed • Most cost-effective	• May require prep time (soaking) • Longer cooking time
Canned	• Easy to store • Long shelf life • Ready for use • May be minimally processed	• May contain added sodium, preservatives, or additives • More costly than dried
Frozen	• Ready for use • May be minimally processed • Maintains texture and nutrients	• Most costly • May get freezer-burned

Incorporating Legumes into Menus

Serving legumes is a great way to add variety, flavor, and nutrition to your menus. Here are some ideas to power up meals with legumes.

- Add legumes into casseroles, salads, stews, or stir-fries. They're very versatile.
- Make chili more interesting by combining two different colors of beans (e.g., kidney and white beans).
- Mix pureed beans (e.g., garbanzo) to thicken soups, chili, and sauces.
- Serve low-sodium split pea, lentil, minestrone, or white bean soups.
- Spice up your menus with Southwest flavor. Offer black bean enchiladas, low-fat refried beans, or tacos with whole pinto beans.
- Use chickpeas to make hummus and serve with fresh veggies as a snack.
- Add brown lentils to meatloaf, green lentils in salads, and red lentils in a curry.



Helpful Tips!

Additional Resources

- Explore the USDA [Bean Basics Toolkit](#) for information on cooking techniques and recipes.
- Refer to the USA Pulses [Preparation Resources](#) on soaking and cooking legumes.
- Check out the ICN videos featuring legumes:
 - [Culinary Video for Child Care: Legumes](#)
 - [Preparing Beans and Legumes](#)

References

Institute of Child Nutrition. (n.d.). *Preparing beans and legumes videos*.
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USA Pulses. (n.d.). *Preparation Resources*.
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