

Beans: Agriculture to Health

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History

Dry beans are native to North and South America and were an important staple in the Indian food supply prior to the immigration of Europeans. Dry beans are known to have been farmed as far back as 6,000 to 5,000 B.C. Some tribes on the Northern Plains were primarily hunters of bison and other animals. Other tribes were more agrarian and grew beans and other crops and used them for trade. Various Indian tribes in the Americas grew different kinds of dry beans.

Health Benefits

Healthy Weight

Including beans in the diet on a regular basis can help control weight. Beans are **low in both fat and calories**, and **high in dietary fiber and protein**. The dietary fiber in beans helps slow the absorption of carbohydrate, which may prevent hunger from re-occurring as soon. Eating less frequently may help reduce caloric intake.

Diabetes

The high content of dietary fiber in beans, especially soluble fiber, helps slow the absorption rate of carbohydrate. A slower rate of carbohydrate absorption moderates blood sugar peaks related to food intake.

Heart Health

The nutrient profile of beans contributes to heart health. Beans are low in total fat, saturated fat and sodium. They are high in dietary fiber, especially soluble fiber; folate, a B-vitamin; potassium; and other minerals. Beans help maintain normal ranges for several risk factors for heart disease: blood cholesterol, blood pressure and blood homocysteine levels.

Colon Cancer

Beans are a good source of “resistant starch.” The breakdown products from “resistant starch” appear to play a role in reducing the risk of colon cancer.

Vegetarians

Beans are an excellent **protein source** for vegetarians providing more than twice as much protein per serving as cereal grains. Combining beans and cereal grains together provides all the protein building blocks (amino acids) required in the diet. Beans are also a good source of iron and zinc for vegetarians who consume no meat.

Daily Amounts

Including 1/2 cup of beans several times each week, within a well-balanced diet, resulted in a reduced risk of heart disease in a clinical trial called DASH. In addition to the four to five servings each week from the nuts, seeds and beans category, the diet pattern also included other food groups: dairy, fruits and vegetables, grains, and meat.

Reduce Gas Formation

Gas is produced from beans when bacteria found in the large intestine break down “non-digestible” carbohydrates. The following methods may help reduce gas formation:

- * Eat beans on a regular and frequent basis.
- * Discard the soak water used to rehydrate dry beans.
- * Utilize a commercial digestive-enzyme product .