

Rich, hearty Mediterranean bean soups Love your heart, lower your cholesterol



February is heart month; the perfect time to start eating heart healthier. For some of us, that means **February is soup month.**

On a cold winter's day, there's no better way to be healthy and happy than warming up to a bowl of hearty soup.

Soups make simple one pot meals -- easy to make and easy to clean-up.

You can make soups extra healthy using beans. Beans (dried beans and lentils) are one of the healthiest foods for your heart. In fact, the Mediterranean diet recommends a daily serving of beans.

The popular Mediterranean has been hailed as the healthiest way of eating due to its proven heart and brain benefits. It has been studied more than any other diet for more than 50 years.

A recent randomized five year study on 7,447 people showed that a Mediterranean diet style of eating decreased their risk of heart attacks, strokes and deaths from heart disease by 30 percent. What's even more impressive is the fact that all participants had Type 2 Diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure or were smokers --all of which increase the risk of heart disease. So, eating healthier can benefit anyone, regardless of their risk factors for heart disease.

Study participants ate, along with other healthy foods, *at least* three servings per week of beans, lentils, soybeans or (dried) peas in various dishes. Beans can be served atop salads (such as garbanzo beans atop salads), in stews and delicious soups.

Most people don't think of beans—with the exception of hummus (made from garbanzo beans) — as being part of the Mediterranean diet. But many of the Mediterranean diet's heart and brain health benefits come from eating beans in dishes such as hearty main dish soups.

Fiber rich

Beans and lentils provide protein without the fat or cholesterol in meat.

Their soluble fiber, like oatmeal, lowers the bad LDL cholesterol. In fact, kidney beans are the richest source of soluble fiber, with two and one-half times as much soluble fiber per cup as cooked oatmeal (5.8 grams versus 2.0 grams). Soybeans, navy, pinto, Great Northern and garbanzo beans also deliver more cholesterol-lowering fiber per cup than a cup of cooked oatmeal. So, if you really want to lower your cholesterol, try a cup of baked beans, like the American cowboys, for breakfast.

And beans have a low Glycemic Index—meaning they don't raise our blood sugar very much after eating them. High Glycemic Index foods (like pasta made from refined white flour) cause large increases in our blood sugar, leading to inflammation. Research now shows that its inflammation which initiates fatty deposits in our blood vessel walls leading to heart disease and may initiate plaque build-up in our brains leading to Alzheimer's disease.

(Dried) beans insoluble fiber feeds the healthy bacteria in our colon. Fascinating new research at the Cleveland Clinic has found a link between a compound produced by the bacteria in our colon and our risk of heart disease.

And lastly, beans can help with weight control, another risk factor for heart disease.

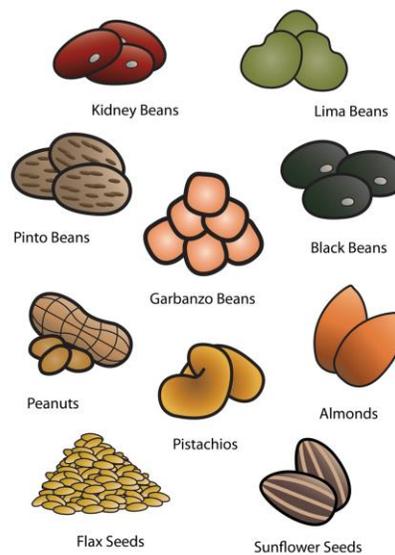
Low in calories

Beans and lentils are my secret weapon against weight gain. Their high fiber content gives a feeling of fullness with very few calories.

Hearty main-dish soups with beans (or lentils) are a delicious way to trim hundreds of calories from any lunch or supper meal. (Leftovers make great lunches.) Just add a few whole wheat crackers or slice of whole grain bread (and extra olive oil with added herbs for dipping), a slice of cheese and fresh fruit or a warm fruit crisp for dessert. Compare the calories in a hearty soup meal with your typical burger, fries and a soda meal and you'll see why this is an easy, healthy way to trim your waistline.

Beans

- Black beans
- Black-eyed peas
- Cannellini (white kidney) beans
- Chickpeas or Garbanzo beans
- Fava beans
- Great Northern beans
- Lima beans
- Navy beans
- Pinto beans
- Red beans
- Red kidney beans
- Soybeans



Mediterranean Artichoke and Spinach Soup

1 Tbsp. olive oil
1 medium onion, chopped
3 garlic cloves, minced
2 Tbsp. all-purpose flour
1 tsp. each: oregano and basil
¼ tsp. each: crushed red pepper flakes, salt, and pepper
4 cups reduced-sodium chicken broth
8 oz. frozen artichoke hearts, thawed and coarsely chopped
1 can (14.5 oz.) diced tomatoes
1 can (15 oz.) cannellini beans, drained and rinsed
1 package (10 oz.) frozen chopped spinach, slightly thawed

In a large kettle, heat oil. Add onion and garlic; sauté for about 6 minutes. Mix in flour and spices; cook for about 3 minutes. Add the broth, chopped artichokes and tomatoes. Bring to a boil. Lower heat; simmer uncovered, for 20 minutes. Add the cannellini beans; simmer for 5 minutes. Carefully ladle half of soup into blender and puree until smooth. (Or, use immersion blender and blenderize for only a few minutes.) Add spinach to soup. Simmer soup until heated through. Source: Adapted by Phyllis Molnar from recipe in Diabetes Forecast Magazine

Hearty Italian Inzimonio soup/stew

(This recipe originates from Florence, Italy)

1 bunch Swiss chard
¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
2 cloves of garlic, minced
1 medium onion, diced
1 medium carrot, chopped
Pinch of red pepper flakes
½ cup dry, white wine
2 Tbsp. tomato paste
2 cups reduced sodium chicken broth
2 cans of garbanzo beans (chickpeas), rinsed and drained

Wash Swiss chard. Cut out middle ribs and slice into ribbons. Set aside.

In a large saucepan, sauté garlic, onion and carrot in olive oil over medium heat for 2-3 minutes or until vegetables begin to soften. Stir in red pepper flakes, wine and tomato paste. Simmer for approximately 10 minutes. Add chicken broth, Swiss chard and garbanzo beans. Cook 10 minutes or until half of the liquid has evaporated and the sauce is thick. Serve hot.

1 Tbsp. extra virgin olive oil
1 onion, coarsely chopped
2 celery stalks, diced
5 carrots, peeled and diced
2-3 garlic cloves, minced
2 bay leaves
3 (15 ounce) cans of various colored beans (red or white kidney, black, or pinto),
rinsed well and drained (or 6 cups of cooked beans)
8 cups reduced sodium chicken or vegetable stock
½ cup brown rice
1 Tbsp. lemon juice or lime juice
¼ cup chopped fresh basil or cilantro leaves
(or approximately 4 tsp. dried basil)

Sauté onion, celery, carrots and garlic in oil for about 10 minutes on medium heat, stirring occasionally. Add bay leaves, beans and stock. Bring to a boil. Lower heat, cover and simmer for 1 ½ hours. Add the rice and cook until tender, about 45 minutes. (Or use instant brown rice to cut the cooking time.) Add salt to taste. Stir in lemon or lime juice and garnish with basil or cilantro just before serving. Or, store overnight before serving, since it's even better the next day.

Note: This recipe would work well in a crock pot.

Fun toppings: A drizzle of olive oil, a spoonful of yogurt, a sprinkle of Parmesan cheese, toasted seeds or nuts, a slice of lemon, a sprig of fresh basil or parsley.

Source: Chop, Chop—The Fun Cooking Magazine for Families Winter, 2011 edition

Thirty Minute Minestrone soup

4 cups water
2 cups miniature carrots, sliced (or frozen sliced carrots)
1 (15 oz.) can Great Northern beans (or red kidney beans), rinsed and drained
1 (14 oz.) can peeled Italian plum tomatoes, cut up
1 cup chopped onion
2 tsp. beef bouillon granules
1 tsp. bottled minced garlic
½ tsp. each: dried basil and dried oregano
¼ tsp. pepper
9 oz. package frozen green beans
1 small zucchini, chopped
½ cup 51 percent whole wheat elbow macaroni or broken spaghetti, uncooked
¼ cup grated Parmesan cheese (for topping)

In a large saucepan, combine water, carrots, bean, tomatoes, onion, bouillon granules, garlic, basil, oregano and pepper. Bring to a boil over high heat. Add green beans and zucchini and pasta. Return to a boil. Reduce heat, cover, and simmer for 10 minutes or until pasta is done. Spoon into bowls and sprinkle with Parmesan cheese.

Source: American Heart Association's Quick and Easy Cookbook