Meaning “lens” in Latin, lentils are small, lens-shaped pulses that are popular in parts of Europe and a staple throughout much of the Middle East. Pulses, also known as legumes, include dry peas, lentils and chickpeas. Lentils are thought to date back more than 8,000 years, and are believed to have originated in the Near East or Mediterranean area. Lentils come in a variety of colors, such as green, brown, yellow, red, orange and black, and their size can be compared to the tips of pencil erasers. Lentils are high in protein and fiber and low in fat, which makes them a healthy substitute for meat. Their high nutrient content and extreme versatility in the kitchen make them effortless, inexpensive and healthy additions to side dishes (puréed, whole and combined with vegetables), soups, salads and stews.

Healthy ingredient contribution

**CARBOHYDRATES:** Lentils are full of complex carbohydrates (foods with a low glycemic index) that release energy slowly to the body. This helps maintain a consistent energy level. In contrast, carbohydrate foods that break down quickly (foods with a high glycemic index) cause the body to crash or feel tired after the sugars have been used.

**FIBER:** One-half cup cooked lentils provides more than 10 grams of dietary fiber. Nutrition guidelines recommend 25 to 38 grams per day, but the average American consumes only about 14 grams. Eating enough fiber is important for helping to prevent chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and certain types of cancer.

**PROTEIN:** Lentils are packed with protein, containing seven of the eight essential amino acids needed in the human body. The only amino acid lacking is methionine, which can be found in many grains, nuts, seeds, eggs, as well as meat and dairy products. Combining lentils with any of these ingredients can create a complete protein dish.

**MINERALS:** Lentils are also good sources of important minerals such as iron, magnesium, phosphorus and zinc. Iron deficiency causes anemia, while magnesium helps maintain normal muscle and nerve functions. Phosphorus is important for the formation and maintenance of strong teeth and bones, and zinc is one of several nutrients necessary to defend against infections.

**ANTIOXIDANTS:** Lentils provide antioxidants (vitamin A, vitamin C, etc.), which bind with and destroy free radicals, reducing damage to cells.

**FOLATE:** Lentils contain folate, which is an especially important nutrient for pregnant women. The U.S. Department of Health & Human Services recommends that all women of childbearing age consume 400 mcg of folate per day to help prevent birth defects before and during pregnancy. Most women do not meet this guideline.

Varieties and uses

While there are many unique varieties of lentils, the three main ones found in supermarkets and specialty stores are brown, green and red varieties. Lentils are sold whole or split and some have had the hulls removed. Unlike other dried legumes, lentils cook quickly and do not require soaking. Make sure to rinse away any dirt, dust or debris before adding them to recipes. For each cup of lentils, use at least two and a half cups of water. Bring to a boil, cover and simmer slowly until lentils are tender. Drain excess liquid. Cooking times vary depending on the variety of lentil, but allot around 20-35 minutes. One cup of dry whole lentils will yield about two and a half cups of cooked lentils. Hulled lentils yield about two cups.

- **Brown lentils:** As the most common and readily available variety, they have a mild flavor and will hold their shape when cooked. However, they do tend to become mushy when cooked too long. Use for soups.
- **French green lentils:** Considered by many to be the most delicate and flavorful of lentils, these small, brownish-green to speckled-green lentils originated in Le Puy, France. They have a rich, nutty flavor and stay firm when cooked, which makes them the best choice for salads.
- **Split red lentils:** As the fastest cooking variety, these salmon-colored lentils turn golden and lose their shape when cooked. They have a milder and sweeter taste. Use in purées and Indian dals.
- **Yellow lentils:** Usually sold split, these have a mild nutty flavor and possess a similar texture to red lentils. In India, these are often ground into flour.
- **Black or Beluga lentils:** Small, delicate, black and shiny like Beluga caviar when cooked, these are more expensive than other varieties. Use in soups and salads.
- **White or ivory lentils:** These are actually black lentils that have been hulled and split, revealing their white interior. Being both mild in flavor and soft in texture, these are best in soups and stews.
### Lentil cooking times

**Salads:** 20-25 minutes  
**Main dishes:** 25-30 minutes  
**Soups:** 30+ minutes  
**Purées:** 35+ minutes  
**Hulled lentils:** 6-12 minutes  
**Hulled lentil purée:** 10-20 minutes

### Storage

Lentils should be stored in an airtight container at room temperature for up to a year.

### Serving size

1 cup cooked lentils contains:
- 16 g fiber
- 18 g protein
- 7 mg iron
- 358 mcg folate

### Lentil Apple Muffins

**Yield:** 12 servings (serving size: 1 muffin)

**Ingredients:**

- 1 egg
- ½ cup canola oil
- 1 cup USA lentil purée  
  (recipe follows)
- 1 cup canned apple pie filling
- ½ cup whole wheat flour
- ¾ cup all-purpose flour
- ⅓ cup packed brown sugar
- 2 t. baking powder
- 1 t. baking soda
- 1 t. ground cinnamon
- ½ t. salt
- ¼ t. ground allspice
- ⅛ t. ground nutmeg

**Method:**

Preheat oven to 400°F. Spray muffin pan with nonstick vegetable cooking spray or line with paper baking cups. In a large mixing bowl, beat egg. Stir in oil. Add lentil purée and apple filling. In separate bowl, combine flours, sugar, baking powder, baking soda, cinnamon, salt, allspice and nutmeg. Stir dry mixture into purée mixture just until flour is moistened. Spoon batter into prepared muffin pan. Bake 15 minutes, or until top of muffin bounces back when touched or a toothpick inserted into the center comes out clean.

**USA Lentil Purée**

**Ingredients:**

- ¾ cup dry USA lentils
- 2 cups water

### Method:

Rinse lentils; drain. Bring dry lentils to a boil. Cover; simmer 30 minutes. (The longer they cook the softer they become.) Stir frequently. Cool slightly; do not drain. Purée in blender or food processor until reaches consistency of canned pumpkin. Add water to thin, if needed. (Excess purée can be frozen for future use.)

**Nutrition Information**

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