

Tips for Better Bean Digestion

Legumes are without a doubt one of the most nutrient dense and health-supporting foods for vegans and vegetarians (and all conscious eaters)! Legumes are good sources of iron, B vitamins, folate, and calcium. They are rich in soluble fiber, which—in addition to its cholesterol lowering properties—may be helpful in the management of irritable bowel syndrome (see this post for the differences between soluble and insoluble fiber). The fiber also aids in satiety and helps to stabilize blood sugar, which means you won't crash after your meal. Add to that the fact that beans have an incredibly high nutrient:calorie ratio, are good sources of vegan protein, and enable all sorts of delicious meals, and you have quite a few reasons to add more of them to your diet!

Of course, as certain time-honored childhood rhymes go, beans can be difficult for some people to digest. Why? They contain oligosaccharides, or starches, for which our bodies have limited stores of digestive enzymes. We do have some of the enzyme, but it resides only in our stomach bacteria, and if we don't eat beans regularly, we likely won't have quite enough of it to digest them without trouble (note, however, that we do have the enzyme in some amount; lots of sources claim that we simply lack it altogether, which is not entirely accurate).

As you'll see, the main way to combat this challenge is to gradually add more beans to your diet, which will encourage the enzyme's presence.

1) Increase your bean consumption—gradually. Per the above, eating more and more legumes will encourage a greater presence of the enzyme we need to digest them, and help to get you over your fear of the mighty bean!

Try adding them into your diet in 1/4 cup increments, and increasing very slowly. I can eat at least a cup of beans in one sitting (though a more standard portion size, for me, is 1/2 to 3/4 cup), but that's because I've been happily and comfortably eating beans for a long time. Keep experimenting with fun, new recipes until you arrive at a place where you're digesting beans without discomfort.

2) Try Beanzyme. This is a vegan version of Beano (which, sadly, is not vegan). It's a supplement of the enzyme necessary for bean digestion (also useful for crucifers like broccoli, which contain oligosaccharides, too), and it can be immensely helpful if you plan on eating a meal that is rich in legumes.

3) Soak your beans before cooking. Do you make beans from scratch? If not, it's a great habit to get into: it's cheaper than buying canned beans, it leaves you with zero risk of BPA lining from cans getting into your food, and home cooked beans are simply so much tastier (especially in hummus) than canned.

If you do boil beans from scratch, soaking them beforehand may make a difference in terms of digestibility because it releases the tricky oligosaccharides that cause discomfort. You can either do a "quick soak" or a "long soak." For a "quick soak," rinse and pick over your beans, cover them with water (1 part beans: 3 parts water) and boil them for five minutes. Let them sit for an hour after, and then cook through.

For a long soak, pick over and clean beans, cover them in water (1 part beans : 3 parts water) and then let them soak 8 hours, or overnight. Drain and change water before cooking through. For most beans, this will mean about an hour of simmering. If you pressure cook your beans, you can still do the soak beforehand!

4) Cook beans with a strip of kombu (a seaweed available online and in health stores). I used to wonder why people did this, until I was told that kombu actually contains some of the enzyme needed to digest beans. Not entirely sure if it's true, but cooking beans with kombu is a very old tradition (common in macrobiotic cooking) so I would not be surprised if this were the underlying wisdom.

5) If you use canned beans, be sure to rinse them thoroughly. I love using the canning juice in hummus sometimes, because the starch creates a thick texture, but the truth is that this liquid can certainly enhance flatulence. So if beans don't go down easily for you, rinse and rinse some more.

6) Eat beans with other grains and proteins. Prevailing wisdom used to dictate that vegans had to eat "complete" proteins at each meal by pairing foods together—rice and beans are a good example. We now know that this is not the case; so long as vegans take care to get all essential amino acids over the course of each day, week, month, and so on, whether or not they are eaten together at each meal is not essential (though it may be a good way to remind yourself to eat consciously).

That said, some claim that beans are easier to digest when paired with other proteins that "complete" the protein profile for a meal, so if you have a hard time with them, you may want to try rounding them out with quinoa, rice, or barley (or any whole grain you love).

7) Don't salt beans while you cook them; flavor them after they're cooked. Salting will cook beans faster, but they'll be tougher in texture and may not have the same digestibility that slow cooking and soaking afford.

8) Add some spice. In traditional Indian cooking, spices are thought to improve the digestibility of legumes. The scientific logic behind this may be that certain spices will actually change the enzymatic properties of the beans, thus changing how easily we can break them down. Indian spices used in bean preparation include ginger, turmeric, fennel and asafoetida.

9) Add beans to your soup. The broth and liquid will first absorb, and then cook off, some of the resistant oligosaccharides, which may help you to digest the beans.

10) Follow all of my usual tips for happy digestion: chew thoroughly, eat mindfully, don't chug water with meals.

It's also worth noting that beans contain something called resistant starch, a class of starch that cannot be completely digested. It's similar to oligosaccharides, but not the same thing. And ironically, it is our inability to digest the stuff completely that makes it good for us! Resistant starches are fermented by intestinal bacterial into fatty acids, and this process has been linked to a reduced risk of colon cancer (dramatically, in some studies).

Wow, congratulations! That's so awesome and well-deserved!

Great tips on the beans. Two more I might add: as well as/instead of kombu, cook with a piece of ginger in there. And add vinegar or anything acidic after the beans are already tender—otherwise, it'll retard their thorough cooking. Great primer on the poly- and oligosaccharides and resistant starch also. So much cheaper and better made at home... Cook them long and slow...

I'm interested to hear about "beanzyme"—beano is not only not vegan, it also contains gluten, so I wonder whether beanzyme does better on that score.

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