

Green and Dried Peas: Protein, Fiber and More

The Folklore. As possibly one of the first takeout foods, hot pea soup was sold by street vendors in ancient Athens. In the 1800s, Austrian monk Gregor Mendel famously studied and cross-bred pea plants in the garden of his monastery. It was there the modern science of genetics was born.

The Facts. Like beans and lentils, peas are legumes. Green peas (*Pisum sativum*), are shelled from inedible pods, while snap peas and snow peas have edible pods. Dried peas (*Pisum arvense*) come from mature field peas, the variety grown for drying. Black-eyed peas are a whole different plant.

As legumes, peas are higher in protein than the average side dish—half a cup of dried peas has more protein than an egg. Green peas, snap peas and snow peas are picked when less mature, so have less protein, about half that. Still impressive.

Green peas are a leading source of lutein and zeaxanthin, phytonutrients that protect eyes against free radical damage. They are also a good source of vitamin K, though not nearly as good as dark leafy greens, so you don't need to adjust your dosage of an anti-coagulant like *Coumadin*. Dried peas, in contrast, are rich in potassium. Both green and dried peas provide ample folate, thiamin, manganese and fiber (dried has twice that of green).

The Findings. Emerging research on vitamin K, a key player in blood clotting, shows it also can boost bone mass and help prevent fractures by aiding the body in making more of the active form of osteocalcin, a bone-building protein. Peas' protein content is of potential help to the prevention of sarcopenia, the age-related loss of muscle. People with high intakes of lutein and zeaxanthin, have less risk of age-related macular degeneration, a leading cause of blindness in people age 65 and up.

The Finer Points. Green peas are mostly sold frozen or canned; they're harder to find fresh. But fresh snow peas and sugar snap peas are readily available. Store in a plastic bag in the refrigerator; they'll keep for up to a week. Whole dried peas require soaking for several hours before cooking, but split peas do not. (Split peas are simply dried peas that have been mechanically split along a natural seam.)

Add green peas to salads, casseroles and stir-frys for flavor and vibrant color. Or puree thawed frozen peas in a blend-

er along with fresh-chopped herbs for a creamy dip. Cooked, pureed peas make the ideal thickener for soup or stew.

—Anastasia Schepers, M.S., R.D.

Notable Nutrients

(1/2 cup frozen green peas, cooked)

Calories: 62
 Protein: 4 grams (8% DV)
 Thiamin: 0.23 milligram (15% DV)
 Folate: 47 micrograms (11% DV)
 Vitamin C: 8 milligrams (13% DV)
 Vitamin K: 19 micrograms (24% DV)
 Manganese: 0.22 milligram (11% DV)
 Fiber: 4.4 grams (18% DV)
 Beta-carotene: 1,000 micrograms
 Lutein and zeaxanthin: 1,900 micrograms

(1/2 cup split peas, cooked)

Calories: 116
 Protein: 8 grams (16% DV)
 Thiamin: 0.19 milligram (13% DV)
 Folate: 64 micrograms (16% DV)
 Manganese: 0.39 milligram (20% DV)
 Potassium: 355 milligrams (10% DV)
 Fiber: 8 grams (32% DV)

DV = Daily Value

EN's Own Easy Split-Pea Soup With Leeks and Parsnips

1 pound dry split peas
 2 bay leaves
 1 large leek, finely diced (about 3 cups)
 2 small parsnips (or carrots), finely diced
 1 clove garlic, minced
 1 teaspoon rosemary, crushed
 1 teaspoon salt

- Put peas in a colander. Sort and discard debris, rinsing peas several times. Place peas and bay leaves in a large pot with 8 cups of water.
- Heat about 2 tablespoons of olive oil in a large sauté pan. Add leeks, parsnips and garlic. Cook three or four minutes.
- Combine with peas in pot. Bring to a boil for one minute. Add rosemary and salt. Reduce heat and simmer, covered, for 1 1/2 hours, until leeks and peas are soft.

Makes about 10 one-cup servings.

Nutrition Information Per Serving: 192 calories, 11 g protein, 31 g carbohydrate, 3 g fat, 12 g fiber, 137 mcg folate, 242 mg sodium, 500 mg potassium.
 g=grams; mcg=micrograms; mg=milligrams

- **Capers are exceptionally rich in naturally occurring antioxidant compounds.** Researchers from Italy have determined that even the small amounts of these flavor enhancers typically used in Mediterranean dishes provide enough antioxidant flavonoids to confer health benefits. Capers, the unopened green flower buds of the *Capparis spinosa* bush, are typically preserved in a vinegar brine. The researchers found that extracts of capers increased available vitamin E and helped prevent the oxidation of fats, both of which may help reduce the risk of heart disease.

Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry, October 17, 2007.

- **Flaxseed oil may help lower blood pressure**, say Greek researchers, who studied 59 men for 12 weeks. Half the men were given eight grams (a little more than half a tablespoon) daily of flaxseed oil, a rich source of the omega-3 fatty acid alpha-linolenic acid (ALA). The other half were given safflower oil. Those getting the flaxseed oil experienced a clinically significant 3% to 6% reduction in their blood pressure readings. The beneficial effect on blood pressure may be courtesy of prostaglandins, metabolites of ALA that regulate blood pressure as well as salt and water balance in the body.

European Journal of Clinical Nutrition, October 2007.

- **Tea does not interfere with iron absorption**, as previously thought, according to French researchers who examined tea consumption habits and blood iron levels of 954 men and 1,639 women. They found that iron levels were not linked to intake of black, green or herbal tea, nor to tea strength or time of day consumed.

European Journal of Clinical Nutrition, October 2007.

In Coming Issues

- **How to Get More Whole Grains.** Why you should, what to look for.
- **Foods That Help Your Heart.** Which products are best?
- **Make Every Calorie Count.** Get more nutrients without eating more.
- **Testing Blood for Vitamins and Minerals.** Is it a good idea?

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