

Perfect Pasta Every Time

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans stress the importance of choosing a diet low in fat, saturated fat and cholesterol, and choosing a diet high in complex carbohydrates. But after a hectic day, you don't want to work overtime in the kitchen. Pasta is the solution for quick, tasty and nutritious meals that can fit any budget. Pasta is an important source of protein, fiber and complex carbohydrates, as well as B-vitamins and iron.

Pasta is also low in fat, cholesterol, sodium and calories.

Allow two ounces of dry pasta for every serving. This yields about 1½ cups of cooked pasta. **The key to successful pasta cookery is to use plenty of water and avoid overcooking.** For perfect pasta every time, follow these instructions.

- ❶ In a large pot, bring 4 to 6 quarts of water to a boil for every pound of dry pasta.
- ❷ When the water reaches a hard, rolling boil, add the pasta gradually, stirring at the same time. The rapid boil helps circulate the pasta for uniform results. Allow the water to return to a boil and stir occasionally to prevent sticking.
- ❸ Follow the package directions for cooking times. Each brand and shape has been tested by the manufacturer to determine the best cooking times. The pasta should be tender to fairly firm (*al dente*). If the pasta is used as part of a dish that requires further cooking, slightly undercook the pasta.
- ❹ Drain pasta in a colander to stop the cooking action. Do not rinse unless the recipe specifically says to do so. Add 1 to 2 tablespoons of margarine or olive oil to prevent pasta from sticking together or toss immediately with sauce.

STORING PASTA

Uncooked: When stored in a cool, dry place in an airtight container, dry pasta will last almost indefinitely.

Cooked: Refrigerate cooked pasta in an airtight container for up to 5 days. Because pasta will continue to absorb flavors and oils from sauces, cooked pasta and sauce should be stored separately.

FREEZING PASTA

The best pasta shapes for freezing are those used in baked recipes, such as lasagna, jumbo shells, ziti and manicotti. For best results, prepare the recipe and freeze it before baking. To bake, thaw the dish in the refrigerator and then bake about ten minutes longer than the recipe directs.

Much of pasta's natural goodness comes from its primary ingredient of durum wheat. Semolina, made from coarsely grinding the endosperm of durum wheat, is mixed with water to produce spaghetti and macaroni products. Noodles are made from a mixture of water, eggs and durum wheat flour.

Pasta has a wide variety of shapes and sizes, but which one to use? As a guideline, consider that larger, bulkier sauces complement larger pastas. Delicate pastas are enhanced by simple, elegant sauces or oils. With over 100 different shapes to choose from in the United States, pasta can help add variety to your meals. Use the following as a guide to pasta shapes.

PASTA SHAPES



Photo by Sandra Bastin

Here are some tips to help you incorporate more pasta into your diet.

- Try a pasta salad for lunch for an added boost of energy.
- Keep plenty of pasta on hand for expected and unexpected company.
- If you're serving pasta for dinner, make a little extra for your lunch the next day. A cold pasta salad tossed with vegetables or fruit is delicious. Or, in colder months, heat up leftover spaghetti or lasagna.
- If you're counting calories, satisfy your palate with a variety of pasta dishes tossed with a light sauce or dressing. Each five-ounce serving of pasta contains only 210 Calories and one gram of fat.
- On a budget? Most pasta recipes can be served for just pennies per serving.

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