How to cook lentils: times and ratios for every type

By the Vegochef team · Editorial standards · Last checked 27 Oct 2026 · 7 min read

Quick answer: rinse the lentils, then simmer 1 cup of dry lentils in about 3 cups of water, uncovered, until tender. Red and yellow lentils take 15–20 minutes and turn soft. Green and brown lentils take 20–30 minutes, and French green (Puy) and black (beluga) lentils 20–25 minutes, and keep their shape. No soaking needed. Salt at the end.

Lentils are the fastest legume in the kitchen: no soaking, one pot, and dinner in under half an hour. The only thing to get right is the type, because a red lentil and a black lentil behave very differently in the pan.

Cooking times and water ratios

For 1 cup (about 200 g) of dry lentils, simmered on the stove. Times vary with the age of the lentils, so start tasting a few minutes early.

TYPE	WATER	TIME	TEXTURE	BEST FOR
Red or yellow (split)	2½–3 cups	15–20 min	Soft, falls apart	Dal, curry, soup, sauces
Brown	3 cups	20–30 min	Soft, mostly holds shape	Soups, stews, burgers, chili

TYPE	WATER	TIME	TEXTURE	BEST FOR
Green	3 cups	25–30 min	Firm, holds shape	Salads, stews, side dishes
French green (Puy)	3 cups	20–25 min	Firm, peppery	Salads, warm sides
Black (beluga)	3 cups	20–25 min	Firm, glossy	Salads, bowls, with fish or eggs

Yield: 1 cup of dry lentils makes about 2½ cups cooked, enough for 3 servings.

How to cook lentils on the stove

1. **Measure and rinse.** Put the lentils in a sieve, pick out any small stones, and rinse under cold water.
2. **Add water or stock.** Use the ratio in the table. For extra flavour, add a bay leaf, a garlic clove or half an onion.
3. **Bring to a boil, then simmer.** Turn the heat down as soon as it boils and keep it at a gentle simmer, uncovered. A hard boil splits the skins.
4. **Taste.** Start checking at the low end of the time range. The lentils are done when they're tender all the way through.
5. **Drain and season.** Drain any water that's left (red lentils usually absorb it all), then add salt, a little olive oil, and lemon juice or vinegar.

When to add salt and acid

Salt can go in at any time, but adding it at the end makes it easier to get right. Add **acidic ingredients** such as tomatoes, vinegar, wine or lemon juice **once the lentils are tender**: acid slows softening, which is why lentils sometimes stay hard in a tomato sauce.

Pressure cooker and Instant Pot

Use the same ratio of 1 cup lentils to 3 cups water.

- **Green and brown lentils:** about 8–10 minutes at high pressure, then 10 minutes natural release.
- **French green and black lentils:** about 8–10 minutes at high pressure, then 10 minutes natural release. Taste before serving; older lentils can need a few minutes more.
- **Red lentils:** they cook so fast on the stove that a pressure cooker isn't worth it, and they can foam and block the valve.

Do you need to soak lentils?

No. Lentils are small and thin-skinned, so they cook in 15–30 minutes without soaking. If you do soak them for a few hours, they'll cook a few minutes faster. Unlike dried beans, there's no safety reason to soak or pre-boil them, but always cook lentils fully; don't eat them raw.

Canned or dry?

Canned lentils are already cooked: rinse and drain them, then warm them through or add them straight to salads. A 400 g (15 oz) can holds about 1½ cups of lentils. **Dry lentils** cost less, taste better and let you choose the texture. A bag keeps for about a year in a cool cupboard; older lentils still cook but take longer.

Storing cooked lentils

- **Fridge:** let them cool, then keep in a closed container for 3–5 days.
- **Freezer:** freeze in portions, flat in freezer bags, for up to 3 months. They go straight from the freezer into soups and curries.

Cooking a big batch on Sunday is one of the easiest ways to meal prep for the week.

Which lentils for which dish?

- **Creamy dal, curry or soup:** red or yellow lentils. Try our red lentil curry or curried red lentil and tomato soup.
- **Salads:** French green or black lentils, which stay firm. Brown lentils work if you watch the time. See our lentil salad.
- **Stews and chili:** brown or green lentils. Our Jamaican lentil curry and chili sin carne are good places to start.

Why cook lentils?

A cup of cooked lentils has about **18 g of protein** and **16 g of fibre**, and they're a good source of folate and iron. That makes them one of the most useful foods in a vegan, vegetarian or pescatarian kitchen. Read more in how much protein is in lentils.

Frequently asked questions

Do you need to soak lentils before cooking? +

What is the water ratio for lentils? +

How do I know when lentils are done? +

Why are my lentils still hard? +

Why are my lentils mushy? +

How much does 1 cup of dry lentils make? +

What is a lentil? +

This guide is general information for healthy adults, not medical advice. Talk to your doctor or a dietitian before starting or changing supplements, especially if you're pregnant, breastfeeding or have a health condition.

Sources

- USDA FoodData Central: lentils, mature seeds, raw and cooked (fdc.nal.usda.gov)
- USDA FoodKeeper: storage times for cooked legumes (foodsafety.gov)
- USA Pulses and Pulse Canada: lentil types and cooking guidance (pulses.org)

From vegochef.com: meal planner and nutrition tracker for vegans, vegetarians and pescatarians. Free for 7 days on the App Store.