



MICROWAVE MINUTES

By JOYCE BATTCHER

Yes, you can make old-fashioned bean soup in your microwave. But to speed things, use lentils instead of navy beans. Your soup will have the same flavor but will be done in about an hour.

Lentils (and split peas) are the smallest and softest legumes, so they need the shortest soaking and cooking times. Many microwave recipes omit soaking for these tenderest of legumes, but I've found soaking produces lentils that are tender all the way through. Not soaking produces lentils with a

little "bite" or texture. Try today's recipes with and without soaking to see which best suits your taste.

To soak, cover rinsed lentils or split peas with fresh cold water and let them stand overnight or about 12 hours. To save time: Place lentils and water in a large microwave-safe casserole, cover, microwave until boiling, and let stand, covered, 30 minutes.

Cook lentils in the soaking water for greatest nutrient retention — especially when using the quick-soak method. With the

overnight method, you may want to drain the lentils and add fresh cooking water. Draining off the soaking water drains away carbohydrate substances that cause gas to form during digestion.

Cooking time varies. Cook lentils until completely tender before adding salt and acid ingredients, such as tomatoes. For slow-cooked flavor, seasoning ingredients — such as onion, celery leaves, and herbs — may be added at the beginning of cooking.

Today's recipes give you choices: to soak, or not soak; to drain or not drain; to cook with cut-up meat or with soup bones. Any of the options you choose will produce a hearty and nutritious soup for the cold winter days ahead.

French Country Lentil Soup
 2½ cups (1 pound) dried lentils
 7 cups hot water, divided
 1 pound smoked pork hocks or small shank-end of smoked ham
 2 stalks celery with leaves
 1 medium onion, chopped
 1 clove garlic, minced

¼ teaspoon dried thyme
 2 medium carrots, thinly sliced
 1 can (16 ounces) cut tomatoes in tomato sauce
 Salt and pepper
 ½ cup minced fresh parsley
 Rinse lentils with cold running water and discard any stones or shriveled lentils. If desired, soak according to directions below.
 If possible, cut apart hocks or cut off large chunks of meat from ham bone. Separate celery from leaves; chop leaves and reserve. Thinly slice celery and reserve.

In a microwave-safe 4- to 5-quart casserole, combine lentils, 5 cups of water, onion, celery leaves, garlic and thyme. Add smoked pork hocks or ham bone and meat, pushing them down into water. Microwave (High), covered with lid, 35 to 45 minutes, stirring once, or until lentils and meat are tender. Cut meat from bones and return meat to soup. Add remaining 2 cups water, sliced celery, carrots and undrained tomatoes. Re-cover and

microwave (High) 15 to 20 minutes or until vegetables are tender. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Right before serving, stir in parsley. May be frozen. Makes 10 to 12 servings.

Note: If desired at end of cooking, mash some of the lentils (or puree in blender or food processor) to thicken soup.

Each serving — 1/12 of recipe: 127 calories, 10g protein, 4g fat, 20g carbohydrate, 285mg sodium, 8mg cholesterol.

With cooked ham: Cook about 25 to 30 minutes or until lentils are tender. Stir in remaining ingredients, along with 2 cups diced smoked ham. Add more seasonings.

For lower sodium: Substitute chicken pieces or cooked chicken, following cooked ham variation (above). Taste and add more herbs or no-salt seasonings. (Note: Do not substitute turkey ham for regular pork ham if you're trying to reduce sodium — both contain about the same amount of sodium. For the traditional ham flavor, but less sodium, try one of the lower-sodium hams available.)

Soaking lentils or split peas -

Cover rinsed lentils or split peas with about 6 cups fresh cold water and let them stand overnight or about 12 hours. Refrigerate (covered) to prevent fermentation if your kitchen is very warm.

Quick soak: Place lentils and 5 cups water in a microwave-safe 4- to 5-quart casserole; cover with lid. Microwave (High) 10 to 12 minutes or until boiling. Let stand, covered, 30 minutes. (For harder legumes, such as navy, pea, kidney, pink, white or black beans, let stand in hot water for 1 to 2 hours.)

Split Pea Soup

2½ cups (1 pound) dried split peas
 8 cups hot water, divided
 1 medium onion, chopped
 ¼ teaspoon dried basil
 1 large bay leaf
 ½ teaspoon dried marjoram
 2 teaspoons instant chicken bouillon granules or 2 cubes
 2 cups diced smoked ham
 1 or 2 stalks celery and leaves, thinly sliced
 2 large carrots, thinly sliced
 2 medium potatoes, thinly sliced

Salt and pepper
 Rinse split peas with running cold water and discard any stones or shriveled peas. If desired, soak according to directions above.

Combine peas, 5 cups of water, onion, celery, herbs and bouillon granules in a microwave-safe 4- to 5-quart casserole, Microwave (High), covered with lid, 30 to 35 minutes, stirring once, until peas are tender. Add remaining 3 cups water, ham, celery, carrots and potatoes. Re-cover and microwave (High), covered, 15 to 20 minutes or until vegetables are tender. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Remove bay leaf. Makes 10 to 12 servings.

With bacon: Microwave 8 slices of diced lean bacon in casserole; add other ingredients and continue as above, omitting ham and chicken bouillon granules.

With smoked pork hocks or small shank ham: Add 1 pound smoked pork hocks or ham shank to split pea mixture, pushing bones into water. (If possible, first cut apart hocks or cut off large chunks of meat from ham bone.) Microwave (High), covered with lid, 35 to 45 minutes, stirring once, or until peas and meat are tender. Cut meat from bones and add return meat to soup, along with water and vegetables. Continue as above.

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