This recent snowfall has me reaching for comfort food. It is a plus that many comfort foods are also economical. For me, I get that warm spot in my heart for beans. As a child, pinto beans were the ones we ate most often, but since then I have learned to love all kinds of beans.

Beans are fiber-rich and protein-packed. They will reduce cholesterol, improve digestion, prevent constipation, control appetite, increase insulin sensitivity and reduce chronic disease risk overall.

However, for many people turning those hard little rocks into a family meal can be intimidating. Nothing can be simpler as long as you know the proper procedures.

Just a simple soak will make them easier to cook. There are quick soak and overnight soak methods, but remember to use a large pot since beans will double or triple in size while soaking. The overnight soak is very easy. Place beans in a pan and cover with water, at least 3 cups of water for each cup of beans, and let them soak for 6 to 8 hours. For the quick soak, place the water and beans in a pan and bring to a boil for 2 minutes. Turn the heat off and let them sit for 30 to 45 minutes.

With either soaking method, be sure to drain the soaking water. The soaking water has dissolved carbohydrates in it that may cause the familiar “gas” that people dread from eating beans. In fact, if beans are well soaked and well cooked they are more digestible, causing less intestinal upsets.

Once the beans are soaked, put fresh water in the pan and simmer them gently. Different beans have different cooking times. They range from split peas and lentils, which will cook in an hour, to garbanzo beans, which require 3 1/2 hours for proper cooking. Don’t add salt or acids (tomatoes or vinegar) until the end of the cooking period, as both of these substances retard the softening process.

I went to the store and checked the price of beans for family meals. A pound of dried beans is about 2 cups that will cook into 5 to 6 cups of beans depending on the type of bean. Pinto beans can be served to the family at the bargain price of 30 cents per serving.
If you choose black beans, figure on 42 cents per serving. In either case, beans provide good nutrition at a bargain.

I love to make a bean soup. You can buy a 15-bean soup for $3.59 or you can buy 15 different beans in one pound bags and mix them up. That gives you a year’s supply of bean soup at a bargain price of $2.03 per pound or 40 cents a serving. In this case, it definitely pays to mix it up yourself.

If you are short of time or just don’t want to cook them, choose canned beans from the store. A can of beans will serve two people and can be purchased for about a dollar in most of our stores. These are still a bargain, but not quite as cheap as cooking them from scratch.

If you need instructions on cooking beans or if you just need some inspiration on new methods to cook beans, we have an excellent publication in the office called “Cooking Dried Beans, Peas, and Lentils.” It can be downloaded at http://www.uaf.edu/files/ces/publications-db/catalog/hec/FNH-00360.pdf or call us at 474-1530 and we’ll be glad to send you a copy.

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