

10 Essential Food to Have in Your Pantry

BY NANCY S. HUGHES

My definition of "pantry items" goes far beyond the deep, dark, "hard-to-find-in-there" storage area. Why limit stocked items to just the dry-storage pantry? Don't forget about your fridge and freezer.

In the freezer, you store fruits, vegetables and even bread in its own packaging, but other items sometimes have a way of getting "lost." It takes one quick step to prevent this: Wrap single cuts of meat, poultry and fish individually before you freeze them. Shape lean ground turkey or beef into patties. That way, they're portion-controlled and you can grab as many as you need any time. They can be quickly thawed in a single layer in a microwave, too.

Think about your fridge: What's in there (or could be in there) that can be refrigerated for a long time? Just take a look at the expiration date on containers. Many foods -- including eggs, cheese, condiments, refrigerated pastas and sauce and even some produce like citrus fruits, celery, cabbage and bell peppers -- can keep for long periods of time.



Cold-storage pantry suggestions:

1. Cheeses (and low-fat Greek yogurt): Parmesan, feta, blue cheese, Swiss, sharp cheddar and plain Greek yogurt. They're more pronounced in flavor, so a little is all you need. Variety keeps your dishes interesting too.

- * Sprinkle cheese on top of dishes after they are cooked to get the most flavor.
- * Cheese and yogurt both make interesting additions to hot and cold sandwiches and wraps.
- * Top yogurt with thawed frozen fruit and a drizzle of honey for a protein-packed dish.

2. Eggs: These are a great source of economical protein and incredibly versatile.

- * Skillet dishes for "anytime" frittatas, omelets, a quick scramble and egg wraps using diced turkey or chicken sausage and frozen veggies.
- * Hard-boiled for "hand-held" breakfasts on the run or healthy protein snacks.
- * French toast topped with yogurt and thawed frozen fruits.

3. Frozen lean meats: Single cuts of meat, chicken and fish, turkey or chicken sausage links, lean ground turkey or beef (shaped into patties before freezing) and meatless burgers.

Dry-storage pantry suggestions:

4. Whole-wheat tortillas (or soft corn tortillas)

- * Oven melts (using steamed frozen vegetables).
- * Quesadillas (using a small amount of picante sauce and cheddar cheese).
- * Breakfast, lunch and dinner hot or cold wraps.
- * Snack chips made by cutting into wedges and baked briefly.

5. No salt-added beans: Navy beans, black beans, kidney beans and garbanzo beans.

* Puree garlic, olive oil, vinegar, cumin and a bit of water for a "from scratch" hummus. Serve with pepper strips and celery or as a spread for tortillas.

* Combine canned tomatoes, chicken bouillon, water, dried herbs and olive oil for a quick soup.

* Add beans to hot pasta and top with marinara sauce and Parmesan for an easy meatless dish.

6. Picante sauce

* Mix with beans and cumin for a quick and healthy dip.

* Mix with beans and olive oil for a bean salad, or heat the beans with picante sauce and a drizzle of olive oil for an easy side dish or filler for tortillas.

* Mix with ground turkey or lean ground beef, egg and a handful of oats for a fast meatloaf.

* Mix with olive oil, dried oregano and a bit of water for a simple salad dressing.

7. Marinara sauce

* Spread on tortillas and baked as a pizza with cooked, chopped turkey sausage, dried herbs and a small amount of feta or Parmesan.

* Pour over chicken breast with frozen veggies or pepper strips, then cook in a skillet and top with a bit of cheese.

* Combine dried herbs, crushed pepper flakes, browned lean ground turkey or beef or thinly sliced and browned Italian turkey or chicken sausage with whole-grain pasta.

8. Canned diced tomatoes

* Combine drained tomatoes, vinegar, olive oil and dried herbs for a tomato vinaigrette.

* Top cooked pasta or simple cuts of meat, poultry or fish with a mixture of heated drained tomatoes, vinegar, oil and dried herbs and sprinkle with cheese.

* Add drained tomatoes to marinara sauce or picante sauce to provide a boost of nutrition and texture.

9. Whole grains: Whole-grain pasta, couscous, quick-cooking brown rice, quick-cooking wild rice, quinoa and bulgur -- these all take about 10 minutes to cook!

* Hot side: Serve hot tossed with herbs, and top with olive oil and/or grated zest from lemons or oranges.

* Cold salad: Serve cold and toss with vinegar, oil, dried herbs, steamed and cooled (frozen) veggies and cheese. If desired, chopped cooked chicken or pork may be added.

10. Sweet or red potatoes:

* Microwave-baked potato: Pierce with a fork, wrap in paper towel and microwave for six minutes or until tender. Top with browned onions, peppers and Italian turkey (or chicken) sausage, cooked chicken or pork.

* Quick fries or wedges: Toss with a bit of oil, roast in a single layer at 425 degrees Fahrenheit for 20 minutes, stirring midway.

* Slow-cooker potatoes: Pierce with a fork, wrap in foil, cook for three hours on high or six hours on low. It doesn't heat up your oven or kitchen and you'll get super-moist results. (Stuff them or use as a side for a single cut of meat, poultry or seafood!)

These suggestions were all created using the pantry items only. Now it's your turn!