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CABINET MEETING

Want to eat healthier? Start by cleaning out your pantry. This checklist can help



Did you know that making a few tweaks to the basic foods you stock in your kitchen can pay off big when it comes to your health? With good-for-you pantry items in place, you're always ready to create a healthy meal. And with less nutritious items stripped from your cabinets, you take the first step away from unhealthy habits.

New Jersey-based registered dietitian Rachel Meltzer Warren, MS, RD, has this advice for making over your pantry: "You often hear you should avoid packaged foods, but a lot of whole foods come in packaged form. Just look for single-ingredient items that are close to their natural state." She also advises you to start slow. "Don't throw out everything you have and start over. As you run out of things, aim for easy swaps to make your pantry even healthier." Here are some key swaps:

TOSS: Vegetable oil
REPLACE WITH: Canola oil and extra virgin olive oil

"Vegetable oil sounds healthier than it is," says Warren. Vegetable oil is a blend of several plant-derived oils, including soybean oil, and it has a lot of omega-6 fats. Although you need these fats in your diet, health experts recommend getting fewer omega-6s and more omega-3s (the kind of fat in salmon and walnuts). Omega-3s tend to quell disease-causing inflammation in the body, while omega-6s do not.

"You're better off sticking with a single-ingredient oil so that you're sure you know what's in it. Canola oil or olive oil has more of the healthy fats you need," says Warren.

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BY KERRI-ANN JENNINGS

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Extra bonus: Both canola oil and olive oil are high in oleic acid, a monounsaturated fatty acid that helps improve your cholesterol levels.

TOSS: Tomato sauce

REPLACE WITH: Canned no-salt tomatoes

Some tomato sauces out there have really short ingredient lists, which means they're not the most processed choice, but even minimalist tomato sauces tend to be loaded with sodium and added sugars. You're better off stocking your shelves with no-salt canned tomatoes and using them to make a quick sauce.

TOSS: Breadcrumbs

REPLACE WITH: Whole wheat panko

Store-bought breadcrumbs might be convenient, but they're usually chock-full of ingredients you don't need, including high-fructose corn syrup and trans fat-laden partially hydrogenated oils. Ready-to-use whole wheat panko is a great alternative. "Whole wheat panko is lower in calories and sodium and higher in fiber than regular breadcrumbs, plus the coarse consistency helps make breaded foods crunchy without the need for deep frying. Try using them to make a super crispy baked 'fried' chicken," says Warren.

TOSS: White rice, pasta, and couscous

REPLACE WITH: Quinoa

"People often don't realize that couscous is just pasta. Quinoa is the perfect replacement because it has a similar consistency. On the health front, quinoa has more fiber than refined grains like pasta and white rice, and more protein than most whole grains [4 grams per half cup]," says Warren.

Quinoa is a unique whole grain in that it is considered a complete protein—containing all the essential amino acids you need. It also has a significant amount of iron and zinc, two nutrients required for healthy cells. Try quinoa as a side dish or as a base for hearty salads, Warren suggests.



QUINOA BLACK BEAN BOWLS

Makes 4 servings

High-fiber canned beans are another great pantry staple to have on hand. Here they team with quinoa in a flavorful dish that's bursting with vitamins A and C, thanks to kale and peppers.

INGREDIENTS

- 1 cup quinoa
- 2 cups water
- 2 tbsp canola oil
- 4 cups kale, ribs removed, chopped
- 2 large bell peppers (any color), diced
- 4 large cloves garlic, minced
- 2 tsp cumin
- 1 tsp coriander
- 1 tsp oregano
- ½ tsp salt (or to taste)
- 1 15-oz can black beans (no or low salt), drained and rinsed

Optional toppings

- Cilantro, minced
- Avocado, diced, for topping
- Grated cheddar cheese

DIRECTIONS

1. Rinse quinoa in a fine-mesh sieve. Put quinoa and water in a small saucepan and bring to a boil.

2. Cook like pasta until quinoa unfurls—about 12 minutes.
3. Drain in sieve and shake out excess water. Return to pot (off heat) and cover a few minutes.
4. Heat canola oil in a large frying pan over medium-high heat. Add kale and peppers and cook several minutes, until kale starts to wilt and peppers begin to soften.
5. Add garlic, spices, and salt, and cook a couple more minutes. Add beans and heat through.
6. To serve, divide quinoa and veggie-bean mixture between bowls and top with cilantro, avocado, and cheese, if using.

PER SERVING

Without optional toppings: 381 calories, 16 g protein, 58 g carbohydrate, 11 g fat (2 g saturated fat), 13 g fiber, 4 g sugar, 114 mg sodium. Calories from fat: 25%

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