Legumes, also known as pulses, are extremely nutritious, versatile and tasty. They can be served with rice or other cereal grains as a main course, or used in casseroles, salads, soups, stews and even desserts. They are easy to cook if you follow a few simple rules.

**Preparing dried legumes:**

* Rinse & sort. Rinse the beans to remove dirt, and sort through them. Because of the nature of the packaging process, there are occasional small pebbles mixed in with the beans. You should also remove any misshapen or discoloured beans.

* Soak & rinse again. On average, dried beans will triple in size during soaking. Use at least three times as much water as beans and soak for at least six hours. Discard the soaking water and rinse again. In addition to hydrating the beans, the soaking process removes some of the *oligosaccharides*, complex carbohydrates that are partly responsible for flatulence.

* If pressed for time, use a quick soak method. After rinsing and sorting, put the beans in a pot and cover with water. Bring to a boil and boil for two to three minutes. Remove from the heat and let stand for one hour. Discard the water and rinse again before cooking.

Lentils and split peas are exceptions - they don’t need soaking. Fava beans and soybeans, on the other hand, may need as much as 12 hours of soaking.

**Cooking:**

It is important to cook dried legumes sufficiently. Raw or underdone pulses contain compounds that can interfere with the digestive process. Cooking deactivates or removes these compounds.

* Use two to three cups of water for each cup of soaked dried beans. Put the beans and water in a pan and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to simmer and cover the pan. Check the beans frequently while cooking and add more water if needed.

* Start testing the beans for doneness after one-half to one hour of cooking. Many factors will affect the cooking time needed - variety and size of the beans, age of the beans, storage conditions, humidity, etc. You can test for doneness by pressing a bean against the side of the pot with the back of a spoon - it should mash easily. The way you plan to serve the beans will also help determine how long you need to cook them. Beans for a salad, for example, should be cooked until just tender. If you plan to puree the beans for a soup or similar dish, cook them until they are mushy.

* Do not use salt or acids such as vinegar or lemon juice during the cooking process and don’t cook in stock or broth. These ingredients will keep the beans from softening. After the beans are done, you can add the desired salt and acids. Other ingredients, such as herbs and spices, can be added at any point in the cooking process.
Use of a pressure cooker will cut cooking time by about 50%. A slow cooker can also be a convenient way to cook legumes. However, the low cooking temperatures involved may not completely destroy some of the antinutritional compounds. To avoid problems, be sure to boil the legumes for at least ten minutes before putting them in the slow cooker.

**Using canned or frozen legumes:**

Canned beans can be used in place of cooked dried beans in most recipes, although the high temperatures used during canning lower the nutritional value slightly. Check the ingredients label when purchasing canned beans - many of them contain added sugar and large amounts of salt. Rinsing canned legumes before using will remove some of the added salt.

**Storage:**

Store dried legumes in airtight containers in a cool (ideally 20°C or less) dry place. They will keep for about two years if stored properly, but are best used within a year.

Cooked legumes will keep for three to four days in the refrigerator. Put them in small plastic or glass covered containers no more than seven centimetres deep. If the containers are too large, the beans will not cool quickly enough to prevent possible growth of harmful bacteria. If packed in airtight, waterproof containers, they can be kept frozen for about six months.

**Fresh peas & beans:**

Fresh peas and beans do not need soaking. Some, such as fresh garden peas, only need a few minutes to cook. Others, such as fresh soybeans, may take close to an hour. Using a vegetable steamer instead of boiling them in water will minimise the loss of water-soluble B vitamins and will yield a more flavourful and colourful dish.

**Finding recipes:**

Check your local bookstore for legume cookbooks. Some good ones include *Passion for Pulses* by Nancy Longnecker, *The Daily Bean* by Suzanne Caciola White and *The Bean Book* by Roy F. Guste, Jr.

The Internet is another excellent source of recipes. Just type ‘legume recipes’ in your favourite search engine.

**References:**


http://chefnoah.com/Cooking/cooking_grains.htm#LEGUMES