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Foundation For Essential Needs

University of Minnesota Extension

Nutritional & Versatile Food Shelf Items

Food shelf shoppers and managers alike understand the value of high quality, nutrient dense foods. This resource highlights 20 staple food items that offer both high nutritional value and broad meal flexibility — ideal for food shelves looking to maximize their budgets and support shopper choice. Each item is nutrient-dense, easy to store, and adaptable to a variety of cultural and dietary needs or preferences.

The list is designed to help food shelves make strategic sourcing decisions that promote balanced nutrition while remaining cost-effective. Items like **beans, canned proteins, grains, and vegetables** provide essential proteins, fibers, vitamins, and minerals, while versatile bases like **rice, oats, and pasta** allow for countless meal combinations. Helpful hints and recipe ideas are included and can be shared with volunteers or shoppers!

Fruits and vegetables

Food shelf shoppers continue to voice their preference for fresh produce, but if it's not available or you have limitations in storage, here are some other options to consider:

Frozen or Canned Vegetables

- **Nutrients:** As nutritious as fresh and rich in vitamins A & C, potassium, fiber.
- **Versatility:** Side dishes, soups, stews, or stir-fries.
- **Helpful Hint:** Select low or no sodium options when possible. Textures may change with the canning or freezing process, making them ideal for soups or stews.
- **Recipes & Resources:** Tomato Veggie Soup Recipe

Canned Tomatoes (diced, crushed, sauce, or paste)

- **Nutrients:** Lycopene, vitamin C, potassium.
- **Versatility:** Pasta sauce, soups, chili, casseroles.
- **Helpful Hint:** Because canned tomato products come in many forms, they can fit into different food categories and help increase the variety in harder-to-stock categories (plain tomato sauce could fit into canned vegetables *or* cooking items)
- **Recipes & Resources:** Tomato sauce recipe

Frozen, Canned or Dried Fruit & Applesauce

- **Nutrients:** Canned at peak freshness and high in vitamin C, antioxidants, and fiber.
- **Versatility:** Snacks, desserts, baking or in smoothies.
- **Helpful Hint:** Select canned in juice or water when possible, select low or no sugar applesauce. Applesauce can be used to replace eggs in certain baking recipes!
- **Recipes & Resources:** Egg Substitutes for Baking, Breakfast Rice Bowl with Fruit

Sweet and White Potatoes: fresh, frozen, canned in water or plain, dehydrated flakes

- **Nutrients:** Vitamin A, vitamin C, potassium, and rich in fiber. Low in fat and sodium.
- **Versatility:** Potatoes are a culturally versatile ingredient and often work as a side dish, in soup, casseroles, or baked dishes. Some cultures make potato-based doughs and dumplings too.
- **Helpful Hint:** Potatoes can be used as thickeners and lend a creamy feel to recipes without any added fat or dairy.
- **Recipes & Resources:** Canned Potato Tips & Recipes, Sweet Potato Fries

Protein

Canned or Dried Beans (black, kidney, garbanzo, etc.)

- **Nutrients:** High in protein, fiber, iron, and folate.
- **Versatility:** A feature in many cuisines, beans are a versatile and culturally responsive source of protein and fiber with a wide array of culinary uses as side dishes, salads and primary protein sources.
- **Helpful Hint:** Beans can be made into dips, spreads, protein-rich salads or even baked goods.
- **Recipes & Resources:** Bean dip recipe, Chickpea & Spinach Saute

Lentils (dry or canned)

- **Nutrients:** High in protein, iron, folate, and fiber.
- **Versatility:** Similar to beans, lentils are versatile and culturally responsive, often found in soups, salads, curries, or tacos.
- **Helpful Hint:** Lentils can be added to or substituted in meat dishes for a budget friendly protein source, their texture works especially well in ground meat dishes. They also cook quicker than dried beans making them more accessible.
- **Recipes & Resources:** Lentil Sloppy Joes Recipe, Slow Cooker Lentil Soup

Canned Tuna or Salmon (in water)

- **Nutrients:** Protein, omega-3s, vitamin D.
- **Versatility:** Sandwiches, casseroles, salads, or pasta dishes.
- **Helpful Hint:** Low sodium and canned in water are generally recommended, but some communities may prefer fish canned in oil.
- **Recipes & Resources:** Salmon Patty Recipe

Nuts, Seeds and Peanut Butter: almonds, sunflower seeds, seed or nut butters

- **Nutrients:** Healthy fats, fiber, protein, vitamin E, magnesium.
- **Versatility:** Sandwiches, smoothies, sauces, baking, toppings or snacks.
- **Helpful Hint:** Combining nuts with cereal and dried fruit creates a nutritious, portable snack.
- **Recipes & Resources:** Trail Mix Recipe

Canned Chicken

- **Nutrients:** Lean protein, low-fat.
- **Versatility:** Tacos, soups, casseroles, or wraps.
- **Helpful Hint:** Select low sodium or canned in water when possible.
- **Recipes & Resources:** Pantry Chicken Stew Recipe

Grains

Plain Grains: wild rice, quinoa, buckwheat, bulgar wheat, barley, white and brown rices

- **Nutrients:** Whole grains are rich in fiber, magnesium, and B vitamins.
- **Versatility:** Base for stir-fries, grain bowls, or soups. Plain grains are a cross-cultural staple item for many communities, check with your shoppers about which grains they prefer.
- **Helpful Hint:** Many whole grains can cook in under 15 minutes, making them a quick base for meals. A serving of whole grains can contain as much protein as an egg!
- **Recipes & Resources:** Bulgar Wheat Salad Recipe, Chicken and Wild Rice Hotdish

Oats: whole, rolled, or quick-cooking

- **Nutrients:** High in fiber, iron, and magnesium. Help support a healthy gut and cardiovascular health.
- **Versatility:** Breakfast, baking, snacks.
- **Helpful Hint:** Oats can act as a thickening agent in soups or stews or help add body to savory or meat dishes like meatloaf.
- **Recipes & Resources:** Cranberry Oatmeal Balls

Plain Pasta and Noodles: spaghetti, egg noodles, rice noodles, couscous etc.

- **Nutrients:** Low in fat, low in sodium, enriched with essential vitamins and minerals.
- **Versatility:** Base for meals with protein and vegetables, cook quickly and have many applications: hotdishes, stir fry, etc. Plain pastas and noodles are a cross-cultural staple item for many communities.
- **Helpful Hint:** Check with your shoppers about the types of pasta or noodles they prefer
- **Recipes & Resources:** Sesame Noodles Recipe

Plain and/or low-sugar cereal:

- **Nutrients:** Enriched with essential vitamins and minerals, can be good source of fiber, protein source especially if whole grain and/or paired with milk
- **Versatility:** Quick meal or base for a meal, snacks, baking applications and accessible to a wide variety of cooking skills and kitchen situations.
- **Helpful Hints:** breading or coating for meat,
- **Recipes & Resources:** How to Use Plain Cereal

Cooking Items

Vegetable Oil: soy, corn or canola oil

- **Nutrients:** Healthy unsaturated fats and vitamin E, supports heart health.
- **Versatility:** Cooking, salad dressings, baking, roasting.
- **Helpful Hint:** Rotate between offering cooking oil and butter/margarine to help control inventory without taking away choice.
- **Recipes & Resources:** Healthy Cooking Oils

Shelf-Stable or Powdered Milk and Milk Alternatives

- **Nutrients:** Calcium, vitamin D, protein.
- **Versatility:** Breakfasts, soups, sauces, or baking.
- **Helpful Hint:** Having shelf stable milk and milk alternatives (almond, soy, oat milk) on hand can help maintain consistent access to dairy products when refrigerated options aren't available.
- **Recipes & Resources:** Plant-based milks nutrition facts, Uses for Dry Milk

Low-Sodium Broth (chicken, beef, or vegetable)

- **Nutrients:** Hydration, sodium control.
- **Versatility:** Soups, grains, casseroles, or sauces.

Dried Soup Mixes (low sodium, high protein)

- **Nutrients:** Balanced macronutrients depending on variety.
- **Versatility:** Quick meals or base for enhancements (beans, grains, etc.).
- **Helpful Hint:** Select low-sodium options when available.

Selection Tips for Food Shelves

- **Aim for balance:** Offer a mix of proteins, whole grains, fruits, and vegetables.
- **Cultural adaptability:** Include staple bases that can fit diverse cooking styles.
- **Label-friendly choices:** Prioritize “no salt added,” “in water,” and “whole grain.”
- **Pairing strategy:** Provide recipe cards or display combinations (e.g., canned beans + rice + tomatoes = chili).

Developed in partnership with University of MN Extension.
Resources are developed and reviewed regularly with input and insights from food shelf leaders and sector partners. Additional feedback on tools can be shared with programs@ffen.org. (Last updated: 11/5/2025)