

## **Beans**

Anatomy books often describe the kidneys as bean shaped, but the converse does not apply. This is because beans, multitudinous in their species, come in many different sizes and shapes. Many beans indeed look like small kidneys, but only one, the red bean, bears the name of kidney beans.

Pythagoras advised his pupils to abstain from beans, possibly to avoid the consequences of favism from G6PD (glucose-6-phosphate dehydrogenase) deficiency, which is common along the Mediterranean littoral. But some think it was advice to stay out of politics, because politicians used beans to register their vote. Such ambiguity has also applied to Chicago's reputation as the Windy City, generally believed to reflect the cruel winds that blow over the city in the winter. But some think it is because of the city's long winded politicians.

Accountants are often referred to as bean counters, as are administrators who cannot see beyond their spreadsheets. But bean counters can also be found among licensed medical practitioners, especially among those who like to tell others how to practise medicine rather than do it themselves.

Beans, red or otherwise, constitute the staple diet of vegetarians. They are high in protein (1 cup = about 16 g), unsaturated fats, fibre, vitamins, and minerals, and low in cholesterol. They are deemed to be good for diabetes, hypercholesterolaemia, constipation, and preventing colon cancer. A certain legendary prince is supposed to have deflowered numerous virgins in a single night while taking no nourishment other than chick peas. This suggests that beans may be a source of unusual vigour, as well as filling one with wind.

Humans cannot break down the oligosaccharides originating from beans because they lack the enzyme galactosidase. Instead they break them down to hydrogen, carbon dioxide, and certain malodorous gases. Attempts to produce a "low flatulence" bean have been unsuccessful, as have manoeuvres such as soaking them in water to leach out oligosaccharides. Flatulence has long been the subject of reviews, including Dr Michael Levitt's reference to the occasionally dramatic explosion occurring during electrocautery of the colon, when the ratio of methane to hydrogen reaches the incendiary range and causes a frightening blast ( *NEJM* 1980;302: 1474[Medline]).