

Plant-Based Nutrition Checklist

For Before & After Surgery



Evidence-informed guidance, adapted from perioperative
nutrition literature and clinical nutrition support practice

BEFORE SURGERY

1–2 Weeks Pre-Op

- ☐ Increase protein intake — lentils, tofu, tempeh, edamame, chickpeas, seitan, plant-based protein shakes
- ☐ Add a vitamin C source at most meals — citrus, bell peppers, strawberries, broccoli
- ☐ Include a zinc source daily — pumpkin seeds, chickpeas, cashews, oats, fortified cereal
- ☐ Check iron and B12 status with your physician if you don't already supplement
- ☐ Stay well hydrated in the days leading up to surgery
- ☐ Follow your surgical team's specific fasting instructions — this checklist doesn't override those
- ☐ Limit ultra-processed foods and alcohol in the final week

Why it matters: adequate protein and micronutrient status going into surgery supports tissue repair and may reduce complication risk during recovery.

AFTER SURGERY

First Days – Weeks of Recovery

- ☐ Prioritize protein at every meal — needs stay elevated while tissue is healing
- ☐ Choose smaller, more frequent meals if appetite is low
- ☐ Keep vitamin C and zinc sources in daily meals to support wound healing
- ☐ Sip fluids throughout the day — dehydration is common and often overlooked
- ☐ Choose gentler, lower-fiber options early on if nausea or GI upset is present, then reintroduce fiber gradually
- ☐ Don't skip meals due to fatigue — keep easy, no-cook options on hand
- ☐ Loop in a registered dietitian if appetite, weight loss, or GI symptoms persist beyond a couple weeks

Why it matters: recovery is a catabolic state — the body is actively breaking down and rebuilding tissue, which raises protein and micronutrient needs above baseline.

QUICK REFERENCE

Plant-Based Food Sources

PROTEIN

Lentils · Tofu · Tempeh · Edamame · Chickpeas · Seitan · Plant-based protein powder

VITAMIN C

Bell peppers · Oranges · Strawberries · Broccoli · Kiwi · Brussels sprouts

ZINC

Pumpkin seeds · Chickpeas · Cashews · Oats · Hemp seeds · Fortified cereal

IRON (pair with vitamin C to help absorption)

Lentils · Tofu · Spinach · Fortified cereal · Pumpkin seeds

NO PRESSURE, JUST OPTIONS

Make It Work for You

Recovery is hard enough. None of this requires fresh, fancy, or expensive ingredients to count.

IF GROCERIES ARE TIGHT

Canned and frozen produce, beans, and legumes are just as nutritious as fresh, often more affordable, and last longer. Canned lentils and chickpeas, frozen edamame and broccoli, and canned tomatoes are all excellent options here.

IF TIME OR ENERGY IS LIMITED

One-pot meals, no-chop frozen vegetables, and simple combinations (a can of beans, a spoon of tahini, whatever's in the fridge) count. You don't need a full recipe to hit your nutrition goals on a hard day.

IF YOU'RE COOKING FOR A FAMILY

Batch-cook a base (a pot of lentils, a tray of roasted vegetables) and let each person build their own plate. Keeps cost and effort down while still covering what recovery, or a busy week, actually needs.

RECOVERY RECIPE

Recovery Buddha Bowl

Covers protein, vitamin C, and zinc in one bowl

Quinoa · Roasted chickpeas · Bell peppers · Pumpkin seeds · Tahini-citrus dressing

STANDARD

Cook quinoa, roast chickpeas and bell peppers with olive oil and spices, top with pumpkin seeds and a lemon-tahini dressing.

BUDGET VERSION

Swap quinoa for rice, use canned chickpeas (rinsed, no roasting needed) and frozen bell peppers. Skip the dressing or use lemon juice and any oil on hand.

LOW-TIME / LOW-ENERGY VERSION

Microwaveable rice pouch, canned chickpeas straight from the can, and pre-cut frozen pepper strips warmed together in one pan. Top with pumpkin seeds. Done in under 10 minutes.



A Note Before You Go

This checklist is general education, not personalized medical advice. Nutrition needs vary based on your specific procedure, health history, and any conditions you're managing. Talk with your surgical team, physician, or a registered dietitian about what's right for you.

BASED ON

Perioperative and surgical nutrition guidance from ASPEN (American Society for Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition) and ESPEN (European Society for Clinical Nutrition and Metabolism), and peer-reviewed literature on protein, vitamin C, and zinc in wound healing.

Follow @plantifulsurgeon for more recovery-friendly recipes and nutrition tips

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