

Hardtack: A Simple DIY Survival Food From History

With only two ingredients and a little time you can stockpile a survival food that's been used for centuries. Let's take a lesson out of the history books and learn from various soldiers, [sailors](#), and explorers throughout time.

It's time to look at hardtack.

Hardtack is a simple survival food. It's really inexpensive to create, and lasts for years. In fact, there's still some on display from the Civil War that's still good.

The most basic of recipes call for only two ingredients: all-purpose flour and water. Other recipes call for additional ingredients, but the basic recipe has stood the test of time. We'll start with that one.

Hardtack provided nutrition for hard times throughout history. It's a good source of carbohydrates. If you keep it and protein-rich [pemmican](#) in your [bug out bag](#), you'll have sustenance to keep you alive for a while.

It's also a good addition to your supply of emergency food. You just have to ensure you keep it away from pests and moisture. If the bugs get it, you'll find weevils living in your stored food. If the hardtack gets wet, it's prone to mold.

Making Hardtack

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Hardtack is simple to prepare. Before you begin, turn your oven on to 350 degrees.

It won't take long to mix your hardtack up and you want your oven ready when you are.

Now, get yourself a big bowl. Measure out two cups of all-purpose flour and dump in.

Next, slowly add a half-cup of water and stir.

Keep adding water, a tablespoon or two at a time.

Your goal is to achieve a thick dough that's just slightly sticky. A thick playdough type consistency.

While many recipes tell you exactly how much water to add, it really varies quite a bit. Your humidity, the dryness of your flour, and the type of flour you're using all play an important role.

A rough estimate is $\frac{1}{2}$ the amount of flour. So for two cups of flour, you'd need about one cup of water.

If you accidentally add too much water and your dough is pasty, just add some more flour. Once it's the right consistency, mix it for a couple of minutes. This will ensure

your moisture is evenly distributed throughout the whole batch.

Now it's time to roll out your dough. A rolling pin works best, but in a pinch you can just pat it out with your hands. You'll want to roll the dough until it's somewhere between $\frac{1}{2}$ an inch and a $\frac{1}{4}$ of an inch thick. Any thicker, and it'll be even harder to eat when it's dried.

Once it's thin enough, you can cut the dough. A pizza cutter works really well, but so does a sharp knife. If you want your hardtack to look uniform, you can pull out a ruler and cut it into 3X3 pieces. Or use a biscuit cutter and have round pieces. Otherwise, just cut it into rectangles that are roughly the same size.

Grab a chopstick or a clean nail, and dock each piece. Docking means you poke holes in it, but don't go all the way through. You'll want to poke about sixteen holes in each piece, with four rows of four. It'll resemble a modern day saltine cracker.

Then flip over each piece and dock the other side. Docking your hardtack will keep it from puffing up in the oven. It'll also help ensure the moisture gets out by allowing the steam to escape.

Place your docked hardtack pieces on a cookie sheet. You'll want to bake them for 30 minutes. When the time is up, remove and flip over each piece.

Bake them for another 30 minutes before removing them from the oven. They should be fairly hard at this point.

You'll want to set your hardtack pieces on a rack to continue drying. Let them sit out at room temperature for a couple of days. They'll be hard as bricks when they're fully dry.

Storing Hardtack

Proper storage is essential for optimal shelf-life. You can pack the hard tack into glass Mason jars, or metal tins. These will keep the moisture out better than regular Ziploc style bags.

You can also store them in vacuum-sealed bags. No matter how you keep them, you want to prevent moisture and bugs from getting in.

Video first seen on [SNO Multimedia](#).

Eating Hardtack

Now that you know how to make and store hardtack, let's talk about storage. While hardtack will help your belly feel full in an emergency situation, it can be difficult to eat. That's because it's so hard.

Back in the day, this survival food was commonly called "tooth-breakers." Make sure you don't bite into it directly with your front teeth. They can break.

Of course if you're a parent to a baby, you'll find a benefit from the hardness. A chunk of hardtack makes a good teething biscuit. Just be sure to provide supervision with it to ensure a small chunk doesn't break off and become a choking hazard.

If you don't desire to simply gnaw on a chunk of hardtack all day, there are other ways to eat it. Here are a few common methods:

Soaking

As hardtack sits in moisture, it absorbs it and becomes softer. You can soak your piece in just about anything. Coffee, soup, and water have all been used historically.

Another benefit of soaking the hardtack is bug removal. During early wars, proper storage wasn't always possible. Weevils

became prevalent in this grain-based ration.

Once placed in liquid, the bugs began to float to the top. Diners could easily scoop them off the top and discard them before eating.

Frying

After cooking up [salt pork](#), soaked hardtack can be fried in the grease. This adds flavor and fat, helping to make it more palatable.

As a Thickener

You can crumble your hardtack with a [pestle and mortar](#). If you don't have one accessible, you can take a lesson from soldiers and hit it with the barrel of your rifle until it breaks. Once it's powdery, you can stir it into a stew. It'll act as a thickener and add some caloric bulk to your recipe.

As a Holder for Spreads

Many people have used hardtack as a bread of sorts. When you add a moisture-rich spread like soft cheese, honey, or peanut butter and jelly, the moisture will slowly soften your hardtack.

Using Hardtack Creatively

You don't have to be limited to the above recipes when eating hardtack. With a little creativity, you can turn these hard squares of dried flour into many dishes. Here are two more ideas for you to try.

Slather it with pizza sauce and toppings and make yourself a mini-pizza. Just be sure to cut it before consuming so you don't break a tooth.

Soak your hardtack overnight in buttermilk. In the morning, fry it up in butter or bacon grease. Serve with [maple syrup](#)

and call it a pancake.

Recipe Variations

Since basic hardtack tastes a lot like flour, many variations of the original recipe have crept up. While the addition of salt, seasoning, oil, or protein powder may improve the taste, they do have an impact on long-term storage ability.

If you decide to make a batch of one of these recipes, inspect your hardtack closely before consuming. Make sure it's still hard and hasn't started to go soft. Be on the lookout for any mold growth. You might even decide to make a new batch every year or so, just to ensure your supply is good when you need it.

Adding Salt

To your original recipe, just add 2 teaspoons of salt. Then, continue as directed above. It'll help improve the flavor.

Adding Seasoning

Hardtack is pretty bland. You can add some other [seasonings](#) like garlic or onion powder to the original recipe to enhance the flavor. Feel free to add [your favorite seasoning blends](#) as well.

You can even experiment a bit within a single batch. Before you roll it out, break your dough into smaller chunks. Add different seasonings to each, and then continue with the recipe. This will allow you to take notes on what you like or don't like before committing to making an entire batch.

Adding Fats

Several recipes online call for the addition of about a tablespoon of shortening, butter, or oil. While the added fat would help improve the texture, it is prone to becoming rancid. This addition is better served for short-term storage.

Substituting the Flour

[All-purpose flour](#) is not the most nutritious flour out there. But, it stores well since most of the oil from the bran has been removed. By simply experimenting with the flour you use, you can change up your hardtack.

Give whole-wheat flour a try to increase the nutrients. Try substituting a cup of flour for a cup of cornmeal. Or a cup of protein powder to add protein to your emergency ration.

Hardtack is an excellent DIY addition to your survival food stores. When properly stored, it can be added [to this list of foods that'll last longer than you do!](#)

Have you made hardtack? With the endless variations, I know I didn't cover them all. What are your favorite additions or ways to use your hardtack?

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