- Prep Time: 15 minutes
- Chill Time: 1 hour (minimum)
- Total Time: 1 hour 15 minutes
- Yield: 10–12 servings
- Difficulty: Easy
- Category: Dessert / Side Dish / Salad

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Ingredients

For the Salad Base

- 1 (8 oz) package cream cheese, softened to room temperature
- 1 (3.4 oz) box instant vanilla pudding mix
- 1 cup cold milk (whole or 2% recommended)
- 1 (8 oz) container frozen whipped topping (Cool Whip), thawed
- 1 (14 oz) can crushed pineapple, well drained (reserve 2 tablespoons juice)

For the Mix-Ins

- 2 cups fresh strawberries, hulled and sliced
- 3 medium ripe bananas, sliced (add just before serving for best results)

- 1 cup mini marshmallows
- ½ cup chopped walnuts or pecans (optional)
- ½ cup mini chocolate chips

For the Garnish

- Extra whipped topping
- Maraschino cherries
- Banana slices
- Chocolate syrup drizzle
- Chopped nuts

Equipment Needed

- Large mixing bowl (at least 3 quarts)

- Electric hand mixer or stand mixer
- Rubber spatula
- Measuring cups and spoons
- Serving bowl (trifle bowl works beautifully)
- Plastic wrap

Step-by-Step Instructions

Step 1: Prepare the Cream Base (5 minutes | Low Intensity)

In a large mixing bowl, beat the softened cream cheese with an electric mixer on medium speed until smooth and creamy, about 1–2 minutes. Scrape down the sides of the bowl with a spatula to ensure no lumps remain. Tip: Make sure your cream cheese is truly at room temperature—cold cream cheese will create lumps that are nearly impossible to beat out later.

Step 2: Add Pudding and Milk (2 minutes | Medium Intensity)

Add the instant vanilla pudding mix and cold milk to the cream cheese. Beat on medium speed for 2 minutes, until the mixture is smooth, thick, and fully combined. It should look like a thick, glossy pudding. Let it rest for 1 minute to set slightly.

Step 3: Fold in the Whipped Topping (2 minutes | Low Intensity)

Using a rubber spatula, gently fold the thawed whipped topping into the pudding mixture. Fold—don't stir—using a cutting motion down the center and up the sides of the bowl, turning the bowl as you go. Stop as soon as the mixture is uniform. Over-mixing will deflate the whipped topping and make the salad dense instead of fluffy.

Step 4: Add the Reserved Pineapple Juice (30 seconds | Low Intensity)

Fold in the 2 tablespoons of reserved pineapple juice. This little trick adds a subtle tropical tang and helps loosen the mixture to the perfect fluffy consistency. The salad should hold soft peaks but still be spoonable.

Step 5: Fold in the Fruit and Mix-Ins (3 minutes | Low Intensity)

Gently fold in the drained crushed pineapple, sliced strawberries, mini marshmallows, and chopped nuts (if using). Stir gently until everything is evenly distributed. Important: Do NOT add the bananas yet—they will brown and become mushy if mixed in this early. Hold off on the chocolate chips too if you want them to stay crisp, or add them now if you don't mind them softening slightly.

Step 6: Chill the Salad (1 hour | No Intensity—Passive)

Cover the bowl tightly with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 1 hour, or up to 4 hours. Chilling allows the pudding to set fully and the flavors to meld together. The salad will firm up considerably during this time.

Step 7: Add Bananas and Finish (2 minutes | Low Intensity)

Just before serving, slice the bananas and gently fold them into the chilled salad along with the mini chocolate chips. This ensures the bananas stay bright and fresh-tasting. If you're making this for a party and expect leftovers, consider serving the bananas on top rather than

folding them in—or toss the slices in a little lemon juice first to slow browning.

Step 8: Garnish and Serve (2 minutes | Low Intensity)

Spoon the salad into a serving bowl or trifle dish. Top with a dollop of whipped topping, a few extra banana slices, maraschino cherries, a drizzle of chocolate syrup, and a sprinkle of chopped nuts. Serve immediately, and keep any leftovers refrigerated.

Make-Ahead and Storage Tips

- Make-ahead: Prepare steps 1–5 up to 24 hours in advance. Store covered in the fridge, then add bananas and chocolate chips just before serving.
- Storage: Store leftovers in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to 2 days. The bananas will soften and brown over time, so this salad is best enjoyed fresh.
- Travel tip: Transport the salad in a cooler with an ice pack, especially in warm weather. It should stay below 40°F.

Variations and Substitutions

- Tropical twist: Swap strawberries for diced mango and add toasted coconut.

- Chocolate lover’s version: Use chocolate pudding mix instead of vanilla and double the chocolate chips.
- Lighter option: Use sugar-free pudding mix, reduced-fat cream cheese, and light whipped topping.
- Nut-free: Simply omit the nuts—it’s just as delicious.
- Pineapple-free: Replace crushed pineapple with drained mandarin oranges.

Nutrition Information (Per Serving)

Based on 12 servings, without optional nuts, and using whole milk.

Nutrient	Amount
Calories	245 kcal
Total Fat	11 g
Saturated Fat	7 g
Cholesterol	22 mg
Sodium	180 mg
Total Carbohydrates	34 g
Dietary Fiber	1.5 g
Total Sugars	26 g
Protein	2.5 g
Vitamin C	20% DV
Calcium	6% DV
Potassium	220 mg