

Mighty little fighter

Flax seed may be tiny, but it has huge health benefits *by Bijal Thoda*

It's a tiny plant seed with enormous health benefits. Flax seed has been part of the human diet for over 3,000 years. However, it has recently surged in popularity, due to its apparent beneficial effects for a wide range of medical conditions.

Though it contains proteins, vitamins, and minerals, flax seed owes its nutritional charm to its three major components. First of all, it's high in omega-3 essential fatty acids (EFA), the so-called "good" fats because they help your body to get rid of the "bad fats." Studies have shown that EFAs have cardio-protective and anti-inflammatory action, help lower cholesterol levels, and help improve immune function.

Omega-3 EFA has been studied for its possible effects on lowering cholesterol, stabilizing blood sugar, lowering the risk of cardiovascular diseases, breast cancer, prostate cancer, colon cancer, and reducing inflammation that may have implications in illnesses such as Parkinson's disease and asthma. The average North American diet tends to be high in omega-6, which has a pro-inflammatory effect. The omega-3: omega-6 ratio in flax is 3:1, so flax is recommended for its omega-3 as a part of a healthy balanced diet.

Flax seed is also rich in lignans, a chemical compound found in plants that are estrogen-like. Lignans have antifungal, antiviral, antimitotic, and antioxidant properties; this serves a protective role in atherosclerosis, hormone sensitive cancers, and infections.

Thirdly, flax seeds contains both soluble and insoluble fibre. Soluble fibre helps to lower cholesterol levels and maintain blood sugar levels. The insoluble fibre helps increase fecal bulk and reduces the time food takes to travel through your digestive tract, thereby helping with constipation and improving regularity in general.

Flax seeds versus flax oil

If you're taking flax oil thinking that it's the same as flax seeds, think again. Flax oil does contain all the goodness of omega-3, however the lignans are lost during processing; flax oil also has little fibre content. That said, one teaspoon of flax oil provides considerably more omega-3 compared to one teaspoon of ground flax seeds.

But our stomachs can't digest whole flax seeds; eaten whole, the seeds merely act as roughage. The best way to consume flax for its fibre and lignan content is to grind or crush it coarsely—a coffee grinder does the trick—but not too fine or the oil starts to reveal itself. If you want more omega-3, then take a teaspoon of cold pressed organic flax seed oil in the morning. Blend it in your breakfast shake, yogourt, or drizzle it on top of your cereal. You can add it to soup, salad, or virtually any meal just before you're ready to bite into it. Take a teaspoon of ground flax seeds at bedtime to make the most of it. There are no set rules about flax consumption. You get about 600 mg of plant omega-3s for each teaspoon of ground flax seed you consume.

Ideally, consume flax in its raw form, since light and heat tend to have a damaging oxidizing effect—especially with flax oil, so avoid heating or cooking with it, and store it in a closed, opaque glass container in the refrigerator.

Flax is available in most supermarkets and health food stores in variety of formats: whole seeds, ground flax, milled flax in vacuum-sealed packs, organic cold pressed oil, and flax oil capsules. Only buy the milled flax in vacuum-sealed packs and organic cold pressed oil from the refrigerated sections.

A note of caution: If you have specific allergies or medical conditions such as scleroderma or intestinal obstruction, talk to your doctor before introducing flax in your diet. ⊕

Nutrition and wellness counselling

To book an appointment for personalized nutrition and wellness counselling, call Bijal at 604.893.2239 or clinic@bcpwa.org.



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