

Flax seed

Although flaxseed contains all sorts of healthy components, it owes its healthy reputation primarily to three components.

-Omega-3 essential fatty acids are "good" fats that have been shown to have heart-healthy effects. Each tablespoon of ground flaxseed contains about 1.8 grams of plant Omega-3s.

-Lignans, which have both plant estrogen and antioxidant qualities. Flaxseed contains 75-800 times more lignans than other plant foods.

-Fiber. Flaxseed contains both the soluble and insoluble types. One tablespoon of ground flax seed has two grams of fiber.

1-2 tablespoons of ground flaxseed a day is currently the suggested consumption amount, according to the Flax Council of Canada.

You can hide flaxseed in dark, moist dishes. The dishes that hide flaxseed the best usually have a darkly colored sauce like chili or spaghetti sauce. You can also add it to your morning oatmeal, some claim it adds a nutty flavor. You can also add it to a smoothie.

Use it in baking as an egg substitute. Generally two tablespoons of ground flax seed mixed with three tablespoons of water and allowed to sit for a few minutes to allow it to gel. Eggs perform six different functions in a baked good depending on the baked item, and a "flax egg" can mimic the binding effect and moisture that an egg would have provided.

The best place to store ground flaxseed is the freezer. Freeze pre-ground flaxseed in the bag you bought it in, or in a plastic sealable bag if you ground it yourself. The freezer will keep the ground flax from oxidizing and losing its nutritional potency.

Besides lignans, flaxseeds and their oil are also the best food sources of an essential fatty acid, alpha-linolenic acid (ALA). "Essential" means we must consume it, because our bodies cannot manufacture it. Essential fatty acids are important for cell membranes, blood pressure regulation, and other functions. Alpha-linolenic acid is an omega-3, similar to some of the fatty acids in fish oil. Omega-3s may reduce blood clotting, thus lessening the chance of a fatal heart attack. Flaxseeds and flaxseed oil may also lower total blood cholesterol, as well as LDL ("bad") cholesterol. But any highly unsaturated oil will do that, particularly if substituted for saturated fats. You can also find alpha-linolenic acid in walnuts.

Two components in flaxseed, ALA and lignans, may reduce the inflammation that accompanies certain illnesses (such as Parkinson's disease and asthma) by helping to block the release of certain pro-inflammatory agents.

The plant omega-3 ALA has been shown to decrease inflammatory reactions in humans. And studies in animals have found that lignans can decrease levels of several pro-inflammatory agents.

Reducing inflammatory reactions associated with plaque buildup in the arteries may be another way flaxseed helps prevent heart attack and strokes.

Webmd.com talks extensively about how flax seed may help in the fight against certain types of cancers.

A prospective, double-blinded, placebo-controlled, randomized trial found that people that unknowingly ate four tablespoons of ground flax seed a day ended the study with lower blood pressure than they started with.