

Fantastic Flaxseed

Discover the many benefits of freshly ground flax

For such a tiny seed, flax packs a powerful punch. “I recommend flaxseed to my patients for three reasons,” says my colleague Victoria Maizes, MD, executive director of the Arizona Center for Integrative Medicine. First, flaxseed provides alpha-linolenic acid (ALA), a source of the omega-3 fatty acids we need. It’s also rich in fiber, with about 3 grams per tablespoon of whole flaxseed. “And it’s an excellent source of lignans,” explains Dr. Maizes. “These phytochemicals alter estrogen metabolism so as to decrease breast cancer risk.”

While there hasn’t been a lot of research exploring flaxseed’s benefits in humans, the small studies that have been done are encouraging. Here, Dr. Maizes shares some notable findings:

Cardiovascular protection A handful of studies have found that flaxseed decreases inflammation, reduces blood sugar and insulin levels, and also lowers cholesterol. One study of 55 postmenopausal Native American women found that dietary flaxseed supplementation reduced LDL (“bad”) cholesterol and overall cholesterol levels by up to 10 percent after just three months. Flaxseed did not appear to affect their levels of HDL (“good”) cholesterol.

Cancer prevention In a 2005 study involving 32 women with breast cancer, those who ate 25 grams (about 2.5 tablespoons) of flaxseed every day between their diagnosis and surgery—an average of 32 days—experienced improvements in breast cancer markers. “That’s a relatively short time period, so it’s encouraging,” says Dr. Maizes.

Flaxseed may fight prostate cancer, too. In one study, 25 prostate cancer patients ate a low-fat diet (20 percent of calories from fat) that included 30 grams of flaxseed per day. After about a month, several cancer markers decreased, along with their cholesterol levels.



Help for hot flashes Small trials show that consuming 40 grams of flaxseed each day helps mild menopausal symptoms. In a six-week study, women who ate that amount of flaxseed had 50 percent fewer hot flashes.

Adding flax to your diet Dr. Maizes recommends buying whole seeds and grinding some fresh each day with a dedicated coffee grinder. Pre-ground seeds cost more and oxidize quickly, creating toxic compounds. Freshly ground flaxseed will keep for one week in the refrigerator, and you can grind as finely or coarsely as you like. Its nutty flavor complements many foods; add 1 to 2 tablespoons to pancake batter, oatmeal, yogurt, cereal, smoothies, and baked goods. You can also sprinkle it on salads, but it absorbs water and becomes gummy if you don’t eat it right away. Dr. Maizes does not recommend flaxseed oil, because “it’s quite expensive and goes rancid easily.” And flax in oil form does not provide the beneficial lignans or fiber that are found in ground flaxseed.

Start with a small amount of flaxseed to let your digestive system adjust to the increased fiber; add more as desired. If using it to promote regularity, you should notice improvement within a few weeks. To help lower cholesterol or treat menopausal symptoms, try using flax for three months to see if it helps.

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