

FLAXSEED

This ordinary-looking ingredient disguises impressive health-giving powers. Now cooks, scientists and therapists are coming together to celebrate its many uses

WHAT IS IT?

Originally from Europe, the flax plant grows to a metre high and bears blue flowers in early spring. Its Latin name *Linum usitatissimum* means "most useful". Flaxseed and linseed are derived from the same plant so what's the difference? Leah Hechtman, naturopath and lecturer in herbal medicine at the University of Western Sydney, explains, "Flaxseed is the term generally used for human consumption, linseed when it's in products such as paints and varnishes."

BENEFITS

Flaxseed is a rich source of essential fatty acids (EFAs), including omega-3 and omega-6. These work in the body as gatekeepers to protect cell membranes, allowing healthy nutrients through and barring damaging substances. "The acids in flaxseed help to reduce LDL (bad) cholesterol and lower blood pressure, thus reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease," explains Tanya Quod, national naturopathy chair for the Australian Natural Therapists Association (ANTA).

George Li, lecturer in herbal medicines at the University of Sydney, points out that flaxseed is a natural laxative. The fibre it contains also helps prevent and relieve constipation. However, the seeds should always be taken with plenty of water, otherwise they can potentially worsen constipation. Taking flaxseed can initially cause flatulence, but this should be temporary.

Flaxseed is also high in lignans, a type of phyto-oestrogen that seems to have beneficial effects on many hormones. Gram for gram, it has up to 800 times more lignans than most other foods.

Flaxseed oil, from pressed flaxseed, has a high concentration of omega-3 fatty acids, which help to thin the blood and reduce the likelihood of clots.

SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE

A recent ten-week clinical trial at the University of Pennsylvania, involving 62 men and women, showed a daily diet of baked products containing ground flaxseed could help lower blood cholesterol.

And a 2007 pilot study by the Mayo Clinic confirmed that flaxseed, abundant in phyto-oestrogens, helped reduce hot flushes in women not taking oestrogen therapy.

Other studies have looked at the cancer-fighting properties of flaxseed oil. "The evidence remains inconclusive, but it is an important area of ongoing research," says Quod.

SKIN SAVER

Flaxseed oil can help alleviate skin conditions such as eczema and acne, as well as boosting hair and nail health, and soothing sunburn. But do not use it on open wounds or broken skin.

CAUTIONS

Flaxseed can cause an allergic reaction in some people.

Flax (both the seeds and oil) can lessen the absorption of medications or nutritional supplements, so should be taken at least two hours apart. It can also interact with drugs such as blood-thinning medications or anti-diabetic drugs. Consult your health professional before taking flax if you suffer from any medical condition, are pregnant or currently breastfeeding.

RECIPE IDEAS

FLAXSEED HAS a distinctive nutty taste that is perfect for adding a healthy flavour kick to food. Some simple suggestions:

>Add flaxseed to breakfast cereal

>Mix flaxseed into muffin or biscuit batters before baking

>Stir ground flaxseed into yoghurt, smoothies or stewed fruit

>Add a sprinkling of seeds or a drizzle of flaxseed oil to salads

>Make a pesto sauce by combining fresh basil, garlic, ground flaxseed, flaxseed oil and freshly grated parmesan

SHOP SMART

Look for cold-pressed oil packaged in a brown glass bottle that has been kept refrigerated for maximum nutrient preservation.

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