

Flax seed

Although flaxseed contains all sorts of healthy components, it owes its healthy reputation primarily to three ingredients: Omega-3 essential fatty acids, "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.

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

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.

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

Hide flaxseed in dark, moist dishes. The dishes that hide flaxseed the best usually have a darkly colored sauces or faux meat mixtures. For a 4-serving casserole, you can usually get away with adding 2-4 tablespoons of ground flaxseed.

Use it in baking. Substitute ground flaxseed for part of the flour in recipes for quick breads, muffins, rolls, bread, bagels, pancakes, and waffles. Try replacing 1/4 to 1/2 cup of the flour with ground flaxseed if the recipe calls for 2 or more cups of flour.

Keep it in the freezer. 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.

Whole flaxseed keeps longer. The outside shell in whole flaxseed appears to keep the fatty acids inside well protected. It's a good idea to keep your whole flaxseed in a dark, cool place until you grind it. But as long as it is dry and of good quality, whole flaxseed can be stored at room temperature for up to a year.

Besides lignans, flaxseeds and their oil are also the best food sources of an essential fatty acid, alpha-linolenic acid. "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 find alpha-linolenic acid in canola oil and walnuts, among other sources. (UC Berkley)