

Sow a Seed of Health

Editor's Note: *This article first appeared in 2003.*

Question: I've been hearing a lot about flaxseed and its health benefits. Is it really as good for us as they say, and what form is best?

T.C., Amarillo, Texas

Answer: The interest and popularity of flaxseed has skyrocketed in the last few years. It has become popular because it has very specific ingredients that prevent arthritis, cancer, heart disease and many other common diseases. Flaxseed contains three important nutrients.

1. Omega-3 fatty acids. Flaxseed is a rich source of alpha-linolenic acid, a unique omega-3 fatty acid—the only type found in flaxseed. Fish oil contains multiple types, but whether they are derived from flaxseed or fish oil, omega-3 fatty acids help diseases such as asthma, cystic fibrosis and diabetes. They also improve numerous inflammatory diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis, ulcerative colitis and Crohn's.

2. Lignans. A major component, these are chemical compounds, or phytoestrogens, that act as a natural source of female hormones. They block some bad effects of estrogen in the body such as estrogen-related breast and uterine cancer. Many experts believe they help with menopausal symptoms such as hot flashes.

3. Soluble, insoluble fiber. The soluble fiber, similar to that found in oat bran, helps lower cholesterol. The insoluble fiber, such as that found in wheat bran, aids in digestion.

Flaxseed comes in two forms: bulk seed and oil. Flaxseed oil and oil capsules are rich in the beneficial omega-3 fatty acids but do not contain the lignans or fiber. Only the actual flax seed contains all three components.

Flaxseed is somewhat different from other seeds in that the body can't digest it if it is whole. It has a thick outer hull, and our bodies don't have the necessary enzymes to break it down. You'll need to use ground flaxseed, which is available at health food stores, or you can buy a grinder (such as a simple one for coffee) to grind it yourself.

The current recommendation for ground flaxseed is approximately two tablespoons every day. Most people find it best to sprinkle it on cereal, salads or yogurt. It also can be purchased as ground flax meal for use in various recipes for baked products.

Finally, be sure to take a multivitamin in addition to the flaxseed, as you will need certain supplements to absorb the flaxseed nutrients, such as vitamin B-6 and zinc.

Question: In the summer, my allergies are getting worse. A friend suggested that I try taking quercetin. What is it?

S.F., Roswell, Georgia

Answer: Quercetin is one of the most abundant chemicals in fruits and vegetables. It is an important member of a large group of plant compounds called "flavonoids."

Flavonoids have potent antioxidant properties but also have been shown to fight inflammation and histamine production in the body. Foods particularly high in quercetin include apples, onions, parsley, purple grape juice and tea.

A number of studies have shown that quercetin inhibits the release of histamine from certain types of white blood cells and thus may help alleviate allergy symptoms. It has been shown to protect blood vessels and enhance immune system function.

Studies from Finland indicate it may also help prevent blood clots, which can block coronary arteries and induce a heart attack.

Finally, because of its anti-inflammatory properties, quercetin may be useful in the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis. When you look at all the therapeutic uses of quercetin, it's easy to see why God spread it so widely throughout the plant kingdom.

The majority of adults get far less than the recommended five servings a day of fruits and vegetables.

So if you suffer from allergies, or if just want to reap some of the other health benefits of quercetin, I recommend that you add this nutrient to your diet (taken according to the product label).