

Flaxseed

By the American Institute for Cancer Research

More than 100 years ago, flaxseed was a staple in the diet. It nearly vanished from use because of its short shelf life. Although it is still uncommon in grocery stores, it is easy to find in health food stores. Consumers are eating it in the hope of preventing cancer or heart disease, lowering cholesterol or controlling rheumatoid arthritis.

Studies have yet to confirm the health benefits of flaxseeds. But the small, reddish brown seeds contain several notable health-protective substances, like fiber and lignans. Fiber helps regulate colon function, reduce cholesterol and protect against several types of cancer. Lignans, which are phytoestrogens like those in soy products, may block the cancer-promoting effects of body estrogen.

Flaxseed is unique, however, because of its high omega-3 fatty acid content. Diets low in omega-3 fatty acids are now being potentially linked to a long list of serious conditions, like cancer, heart disease and arthritis. Besides flaxseed, the few other good sources of omega-3 fatty acids are fatty fish (like salmon, albacore tuna, trout, herring and mackerel), canola oil and walnuts.

Cooking with Flaxseed

You can find several forms of flaxseed at health food stores: whole seeds, meal, flour or oil. Whole seeds cannot be digested, so they must be ground for nutritional benefits. An inexpensive coffee grinder works perfectly. But sure to clean it out before and after use. Refrigerate the ground seed in an airtight container for up to 90 days.

Flaxseed meal has a nutty flavor and cornmeal texture. Like the flour, it can be sprinkled on yogurt, cereal, salads, smoothies, ice cream, fruit and casseroles. Both can be used to make muffins, breads and cookies as well.

Flaxseed oil, also called edible linseed oil, does not naturally contain lignans, although some manufacturers add them. It should be refrigerated. Flaxseed oil works best in cold foods, like salad dressings.

A Few Precautions

Until more studies are done, it is difficult to make specific recommendations about eating flaxseed. A small amount of ground flaxseed (1 tablespoon) per day may provide health benefits and is most likely safe.

However, there are exceptions. People receiving drugs for breast cancer treatment should limit or avoid flaxseed. It is thought that the properties of flaxseed that may help prevent breast cancer may speed up the cancer process once it has begun. Children, young adults and women who are pregnant, breast feeding or trying to conceive should be cautious about using flax, too.

For more information about the effect many foods, including flaxseed, have on cancer, order AICR's book *Dietary Options for Cancer Survivors* by calling 1-800-843-8114, ext. 110. The cost is \$12.