
The Scoop on Flaxseed

Flaxseed—The Health Food

Flaxseed is a small oil-rich seed that is a little larger than a sesame seed. It has a crisp, chewy texture, and most people describe its flavor as "nutty". The unique components of flaxseed make it a very healthy food. Flaxseed is one of the richest sources of omega-3 fats and an excellent source of fiber. It is the richest source of lignans -- plant compounds that have been found to act in humans like a weak form of estrogen. These unique components in flaxseed are being studied for their potential in the prevention and treatment of *heart disease*¹⁻³, *cancer (breast*^{4,5}, *prostate*⁶, *and colon*⁷), *diabetes*⁸, *rheumatoid arthritis*⁹, *kidney disease*¹⁰, *constipation, and symptoms of menopause.*

Where do I buy flaxseed?

Whole flaxseed is available for purchase either in bulk form or in convenient packages at health food stores, some supermarkets, or direct from manufacturers. Two different colors of flaxseed are available -- reddish brown or golden yellow. The color makes little difference when it comes to taste or nutritional value; both offer similar levels of the nutrients that make flax a great addition to your daily diet.

How much do I need?

As of now, there are no definite guidelines established by science that tell us exactly how much flax it takes to help protect against cancer, heart disease, and other illnesses. However, research seems to indicate that one to three tablespoons of ground flax and/or flax oil a day is beneficial.

Table 1. Nutritional Composition of Ground Flaxseed and Flax Oil

1 Tablespoon Ground Flaxseed:

Calories	36
Protein	1.6 grams
Fat	3.3 grams
<i>Omega 3 fats</i>	<i>1800 mg</i>
Fiber	2.2 grams

1 Tablespoon Flax Oil:

Calories	124
Protein	0 grams
Fat	14 grams
<i>Omega 3 fats</i>	<i>8000 mg</i>
Fiber	0 grams



If you are buying whole flaxseed, grinding will help release the omega-3 fatty acids and lignans more effectively than is possible simply by chewing whole flax seeds. A coffee grinder will do the trick, or you can buy it pre-ground.

Flax Food Products

Foods made with flax are showing up in health-food stores and supermarkets. Choosing which flax-fortified foods are best is challenging, but possible. Check the amount of omega-3 fatty acids the product contains per serving, and compare it to the amount in 1 tablespoon of ground flax. For example, if you are looking at a flax snack bar that contains 2000 mg omega-3 fatty acids, then the bar contains at least one tablespoon of ground flax. If you are using flax food products as your main source of flax, choosing foods that contain at least one tablespoon of ground flax is a good reference. If you are using these food products in addition to other sources of flax, any amount will do.

A Word About Oil

Flax oil is a wonderful source of omega-3 fatty acids. However, when you buy flax in this form, this is all you're getting! In other words, flax oil is lacking the other important nutrients that provide health benefits, particularly fiber, lignans, and protein. Also, keep in mind that flax oil is expensive compared to the seed itself, and must be refrigerated at all times.

Flax Supplements

Flax is also available in the dietary supplement aisle. You will most commonly find flax in two different types of pill form -- one containing flax oil; the other containing ground flaxseed. While getting flax via pills may be more convenient for some individuals, there are some considerations:

- To obtain a beneficial amount of ground flax or flax oil through pills, you may have to take several each day. For example, to obtain 8000 mg omega-3 fats that you would get from a single tablespoon of flax oil, you may have to take up to 14 flax-oil pills.
- Pill supplements usually present only a select set of the many substances found in whole flaxseed.
- Supplements tend to be more expensive.

How do I store flaxseed?

Whole flaxseed has a relatively long shelf life -- up to one year. Ground flaxseed is shelf-stable for three to four months when stored in a tightly closed container. Flax oil and pills last six to eight weeks after opening, but make sure to check the expiration date on the bottle. Refrigeration will extend the shelf life of flax and keep it fresh longer.

Flax & Medications

If you are taking prescription medications make sure you inform your doctor of your plans to include flax in your diet. You may be taking medications that could interact with flaxseed.

T.J.'s Flax Bars

1 cup creamy or crunchy peanut butter
1 cup corn syrup or honey
1 cup brown sugar
1 cup ground flaxseed
1 teaspoon vanilla
5 cups crisp rice cereal

Yield: 28 bars

In a microwave-safe bowl, mix together peanut butter, corn syrup, and brown sugar. Microwave for about 3 minutes on HIGH. Stir in the ground flaxseed and vanilla, then pour the mixture over the cereal and mix well.

Coat a 9 X 13 inch baking pan with nonstick cooking spray, then spread the mixture into the pan and press down to form a dense sheet. Let the mixture sit for 5 to 10 minutes, until firmly set, then cut into bars.

Each bar contains approximately 2/3 Tbsp. of flaxseed.

Nutritional information per bar: 144 calories, 21 grams carbohydrates, 3.3 grams protein, 6.3 grams fat (1.1 grams saturated, 2.6 grams monounsaturated, 2.3 grams polyunsaturated), 1.9 grams fiber, and 0 mg cholesterol.

Putting It to Good Use

Here are some simple ways to use ground flax that can be put into practice right away:

Sprinkle ground flax on or mix in:

- Soups
- Hot or cold cereal
- Orange or tomato juice
- Yogurt, frozen yogurt, pudding or ice cream
- Salads
- Cottage cheese

When baking add flaxseed into the batter or dough of:

- Meatloaf
- Casseroles
- Lasagna
- Pizza crust
- Muffins
- Cookies
- Breads

Flaxseed mixes well with foods cooked on the stovetop too. Add a little the next time you make:

- Spaghetti sauce
- Stew
- Pancakes or waffles
- Rice dishes
- Burgers (beef, turkey, soy)
- Scrambled eggs

Short on Shortening

The high oil content of flaxseed makes it a reasonable substitute for shortening. A 3:1 substitution ratio works well -- three tablespoons of ground flaxseed replaces one tablespoon of oil or shortening.

Egg-citing News

The protein content of flaxseed makes it a great egg substitute. To replace one egg, mix one tablespoon of ground flaxseed with three tablespoons of water and let this sit for a minute or two.

References

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