

## ***Fall in Love with Flaxseed***

By Ryan Harrison, MA

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What's smaller than most prescription medication pills but powerful enough to relieve constipation, clear up digestive problems, banish joint pains, fight heart disease, help prevent cancer and heal inflammation? Why, that would be the seed of the *Linum usitatissimum* plant, much more commonly known as flaxseed.

The origin of the flax plant is actually unknown, but it's quite clear that flax crops were cultivated in ancient Egypt and Greece. Today, there are over 200 species of annual and perennial plants in the flax genus. These three- to four-foot, slender-stemmed plants are now grown all over the world. Though less so today, in ancient times flax was valued particularly for its fine, light-colored fiber, from which linens were made. Among the longest and strongest of all natural fibers used by mankind, flax fibers even grow stronger when wet, as the high pectin content acts as a kind of glue.

When flax sends out its delicate blue flowers, it is only a short time until the brown seedpods emerge. Within these pods are the seeds that we value so highly today. Flaxseeds and the oil extracted from them through pressing (called linseed oil) have a fairly wide range of use and are growing in mainstream popularity.

One of flaxseed's claims to fame is that it contains large amounts of both omega-3 and omega-6 essential fatty acids (EFAs). These substances are "essential" because they are required for the body to function but are not naturally produced by it. That means you have to consume EFAs or otherwise introduce them into the body in order to live. You can get EFAs from several sources, and flaxseed is one of the best.

There are several health-related perks to a regular intake of EFAs. They are known to lower cholesterol and blood pressure, support brain function, soothe eczema, ease arthritis, help control diabetes and reduce skin inflammations. Grinding flaxseeds releases the EFAs, making them more readily available to your body. But take care to grind only as much as you actually will use for the occasion; ground flaxseed loses its vitality very quickly.

Other nutritive or otherwise therapeutic components of flaxseed include mucilage, glycosides, and tannins, as well as protein, fiber, magnesium, beta-carotene, zinc, vitamin E and potassium. The fiber content of flax is particularly well-known and appreciated. The combination of soluble and insoluble fiber in flaxseed is essential for healthy digestion. It promotes optimal colon health by stimulating intestinal muscle contractions. As the fiber moves through the intestines, it absorbs water and swells to many times its original size. This helps sweep the intestines clean, assisting in elimination and literally pushing out wastes. Because of this, flaxseeds are one of the best natural defenses against constipation and colon cancer.

The high percentage of mucilage in the seeds plays its own important part in intestinal health, as well. It soothes and protects inflamed, irritated membranes. In this way, it helps treat diverticulitis and irritable bowel syndrome.

Lest you worry that this wonder of the natural world should come with its own set of risks, it's widely agreed that for the average person, when taken in recommended amounts, flaxseed is very unlikely to cause adverse reactions. In general, centuries of anecdotal evidence and today's clinical understanding of the plant's and seed's chemical structure certainly support its safety. That said, it is worth noting that excessive doses may cause toxic reactions in some, and you should never take a flax preparation that is not designed for human consumption. Flaxseed is also contraindicated for a person with any kind of bowel obstruction, and due to its swelling and intestine-sweeping actions, consuming flaxseed along with some medications may also negatively affect the way that the medicines are absorbed; taking flaxseed and medicines two to three hours apart remedies this problem.

There are many ways to benefit from flaxseed and flaxseed oil. Below are some of the most widely used:

- A tea prepared from flaxseed (see sidebar) can relieve a range of problems, including heartburn, bloating, gas, abdominal cramps and constipation. Drink one to two cups of the tea daily along with eight cups of purified water taken throughout the day. For an irritated stomach, sore throat, or a urinary tract infection, add a teaspoon of honey and the fresh juice of half a lemon; drink one to three cups of this modified tea daily.
- Consuming 1 1/2 tablespoon of ground flaxseed (added to cereal, yogurt or applesauce) daily can help ease menopause and PMS while simultaneously helping to reduce the risk of ovarian and breast cancer.
- Conquer constipation by adding 2 tablespoons of ground flaxseed to 6 ounces of yogurt or applesauce and eating this mixture three times daily for about a week. (This combination makes an entire day's worth.) You'll need to drink plenty of water during this time. You can up the efficiency of this treatment by taking an additional tablespoon of flaxseed added to 1 cup of water three times a day. Drinking enough water – 8 to 10 glasses – is essential for success.
- A paste made out of flaxseed and hot water can help ease joint pain. Make a compress out of the paste by adding it to the middle of a large linen cloth and folding the corners into the center. Apply this to the affected area and cover it with a dry cloth. Discard the mixture when it has completely cooled. Double this treatment's effectiveness by placing a heating pad or hot water bottle over the compress.
- Improve skin and hair texture, combat depression, and reduce your risk of high blood pressure and high cholesterol by taking a good flaxseed oil supplement. The highest quality flaxseed oil supplement will be cold-pressed, organic and kept refrigerated before

**Flaxseed Tea**

Pour 1 cup of cold water over 1-2 teaspoons of whole flaxseed. Soak for 20 minutes, stirring occasionally; strain. Warm the tea slightly before drinking.

**Flaxseed Paste**

Soak 1/2 cup of flaxseed in 1/2 cup of hot water for about 10 minutes or until swollen. (Optional: smash the soaked, swollen seeds with a spoon or fork before adding to a compress.)

sold. Taking one to three grams of flaxseed oil daily is common; up to nine grams is recommended for some complaints.

Flaxseeds and flaxseed oils can play an important role in helping you achieve and maintain optimal health. If you think you may benefit from them or simply want to know more, check with a holistic health practitioner or herbalist in your area.

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**Note:** Some information for this article is compiled from *The Complete Guide to Natural Healing*, International Masters Publishers, Inc.