

Flaxseed: A Wunder-ous Food

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We are continuously bombarded with information about what we shouldn't be eating or drinking because it's bad for us. And it never fails that the things we aren't suppose to have are the ones we really, really crave like coffee, soda, sweets (especially chocolate), and fried and fatty foods.

Doctors and nutritionists are now, however, saying there is some fat that is actually good for us — called omega 3 oils. Omega 3 oils do all kinds of nice things for our bodies such as lower the risk of dying from heart attack, smooth out irregular heart beats, lower blood pressure, reduce blood clots, lower Triglycerides (blood fats), Increase HDL “healthy” cholesterol, and reduce inflammation in the arteries. They also benefit other conditions such as allergies, arthritis, autoimmune diseases (lupus, multiple sclerosis), diabetes, eczema, psoriasis, and depression. That's quite an impressive list. The bad news is that the most suggested way to get the omega 3 oils is through fatty fish such as herring, trout, salmon, tuna, and whitefish. Better yet to get the full benefits it's recommended that a person eat two or three servings of fatty fish per week. Most people don't like to eat fish two or three times a week. There's just something about fish that is — well fishy.

If you are not a fish lover there is another less painful way to get omega 3 oils into your diet. It's flaxseed a plant based form of omega 3 fatty acids known as alpha linolenic acid (ALA). You can get your recommended amount of ALA by eating one tablespoon of flax meal (ground flaxseed) a day (two tablespoons is even better). Ground flax is also a good source of fiber and lowers LDL cholesterol and is the best food source of lignans, which may help protect against cancer. One really important thing to remember, however, is if you are not use to a lot of fiber in your diet, do not start out with two tablespoons of flax right away, start with a teaspoon full an work your way up to two tablespoons.

Flaxseed has been used for thousands of years as food, in art (linseed oil) and as a material for clothing. Today most of the world's flaxseed is grown in Canada and the United States, mainly in North and South Dakota, which brings us to a local producer, Central Electric member, John Wunder, rural Howard.

When his first wife was stricken with cancer the couple began looking for alternative ways to fight the disease. That's when Wunder discovered the health benefits of flaxseed. This discovery was made too late to save his wife, but Wunder felt strongly about the need to pursue his quest for others. He began raising between five to seven acres of flax in two small fields. “It was a hassle to get someone in to combine, but the neighbors were good and they did that for me,” Wunder says. Once the flaxseed was harvested he took it to Madison where it was cleaned and put into 50 and 25 pound bags and then Wunder gave it away to neighbors and friends. He then decided he wanted to produce more flax and was looking to contract for growers when his renter decided do something other than farm, which left Wunder with a quarter of land available to raise flax. “Then I had to find a market, because I had so much flax I didn't know what do with it,” he smiles. Wunder and his second wife, Virginia, began their venture by selling their flax to different area stores and eventually were able to obtain markets in Nash-Finch and Affiliated Foods.

Affiliated Foods has over 400 stores, a great market for his flaxseed, but many of the store managers do not realize yet what flax is all about. So John and Virginia have began traveling to some of these stores to meet with management and show them why flaxseed is such an important commodity to have on their shelves. “I'm sure they have flax, but maybe not with enough advertising and understanding to help them sell it,” he says.

John says older people especially benefit from flax and can see it right away. “In a couple weeks they know they are doing something different,” he says. To confirm this John tells of a 95-year-old neighbor who called Virginia shortly after the couple was married, seven years ago. The woman said she would like John to stop by because she had a gift for him. He did stop to see her and the woman presented him with a sour cream raisin pie. “I said ‘Man that's pretty nice-but why—how do I get that?’ she said ‘For 40 years I've taken a laxative every day and now since I'm on your flax I don't have to do that, so I think its worth a pie.’” John says. “The woman is now 102 and is not only still using the flax but has most of the people in assisted living using it too.”

John gives seminars touting the benefits of flaxseed whenever he has the opportunity, he has spoken at Active Generations in Sioux Falls, and a 4-H club and a coronary support group in Rochester, MN. "People are finding that by taking flax each day does wonders not only with constipation and cholesterol but also with arthritis," says Wunder. "We know a man from DeSmet that use to take aspirin for his arthritis, since he has begun taking the flax he hasn't needed the aspirin."

"My cousin couldn't walk a year ago because he was so crippled up with arthritis," says Virginia. "We were visiting him and his wife and gave them a package of flaxseed. He started using it religiously. I saw him a couple weeks ago and he is walking no problems with pain in his joints and he is rebuilding one of his buildings on the farm so they can use it for storage; and just enjoying retired live."

There are two kinds of flax sold for eating. One is a dark brown in color; John's flax is more of a golden brown. "The only difference is that this flax has a light nutty flavor where the dark one has a little more of a bitter taste," he says. "But they both have the same benefits."

Flax is not only healthy, but the plants are attractive and some forms of flax can be found in gardens. It grows as a small bush, approximately two foot tall. Each stalk has delicate lacy looking leaves. "The sun is what brings out the blossoms," says John. "When they bloom, the flower is a striking pale blue color—it is really something to see a field of flax in full bloom."

John's original plan was to grow flax and sell it. He hadn't planned to do the final cleaning of his flax, he just wanted to get the green stuff out of it when it is harvested. "You get too much moisture in it and it will spoil. It will get moldy so I wanted to be able to clean it and get the wet green stuff out of it," he says. But he is having a problem getting his seed cleaned when he wants it done, before it spoils. He some times has to wait up to three or four weeks to get it cleaned." If I have to I'll just get one of those other machines and run the flax through it. I'll set it up so that I can take out the dirty stuff, and if I want to I can run it through another machine and get it clean.

The Wunders have an old trailer house on their property where they bag the seed. It comes from the cleaner in 2000-pound bags, and they transfer most of it into two-pound bags. "We do have some customers that buy it in 50 and 25 pound bags." John prefers to ship the seed in the 25-pound bags because once it gets over 30 pounds it becomes expensive to ship.

Many people like to buy the seed already ground (flax meal). John points out that when you buy ground seed you have no idea of how long it was setting in a warehouse or on the shelf before you picked it up and brought it home. "We have some stores that probably buy one box every two months. In fact there is one man that buys six bags at a time. He has it in his store and if it was ground and he bought a dozen, it would take him three months before he would get it sold. The seed in its natural state will stay fresh indefinitely, but once it is ground, it begins deteriorating and needs to be kept in the refrigerator or freezer and used right away. To make it easier for his customers John now also sells coffee grinders.

Another reason he doesn't want to get into ground seed is because at present John is a seed salesman and can ship his flax anywhere in the country. "But when you grind the flax you have to have processing permission and you have to guarantee that it is going to be fresh," he says. "I don't want to get into that."

There are many ways you can introduce flaxseed into your diet. You can take a tablespoon in a glass of water or juice, but you can also put it on cereal, mix it in with applesauce, yogurt, or in a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. It can be baked in foods such as muffins, pancakes, bread, meatloaf, casseroles and smoothies, or toasted and sprinkled on vegetables and salads, just to name a few.

Ground flax can also be substituted for some of the flour, fat or eggs in pancakes, muffins, cookies, yeast and quick breads: 3 T. ground flax = 3T. Of flour and 1 T. oil or fat; 1 T. ground flax softened in 1/4 cup of water = 1 egg. For more information on flax or to find recipes type "flax" into your computer's search engine—you will be amazed at all the different recipes that are available to you.

John and Virginia's business is not just the raising and selling of flaxseed it is a way of life. "It's a full time job," says John.

"It keeps us off the street and out of the rocking chair — that is something we don't want to do before our time," says Virginia.

"Neither one of us have knees enough to dance," laughs John.

For more information you can write to Wunder Seeds, Inc., 22646 434th Ave., Howard, SD 57349 or email them at jwunder@alliancecom.net