

UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING

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Flax Facts

Flax is a versatile alternative cash crop with a rich history dating back more than 5,000 years. Ancient Egyptians used the fibrous flax stem to craft fine linens which were often used to wrap mummies in their tombs. Today flax is still processed for linens, upholstery, or fine papers, such as cigarette paper.

In addition to its useful stem, flax is also cultivated for its seed—and the oil that it produces. Flaxseed, also referred to as linseed, has been used for everything from varnishes and printing ink to livestock feed. Now a popular dietary supplement, flaxseed and flaxseed oil is being sold for many purported health benefits. While a few of these are based on sound scientific research, many are lacking support.

Flax and its oils have been marketed for health claims including reduced risk for heart disease, cancer, and stroke, as well as reduced risk for certain types of cancers. Though some *in vitro* research shows potential, research in humans has yet to prove any beneficial effects here. Studies on the improvement of cholesterol are more promising, but still unclear. At this time the only apparent positive effect of consuming flax is relieving constipation—likely due to its high fiber content.

Flax as a food can be consumed in 3 main forms: whole, ground, or pressed into an oil. If choosing whole flax make sure to chew sufficiently, the seed will pass through the body undigested if swallowed intact. Flaxseed ground into a meal or flour can be easily added to salads, sandwiches, or baked goods but has a limited shelf life. Ground flax should be stored in a refrigerator or freezer in an airtight container. Flax oil has an even shorter shelf life (6-8 weeks), must be kept refrigerated, and is not desirable for frying, as the high temperatures make it unstable.

So what's the bottom line? Flax meal is high in fiber and protein, and its oils are rich sources of alpha-linolenic acid. While it is no magic bullet (I'll let you know as soon as I find something that is) flax can certainly be enjoyed as part of a healthy diet. For more research-based information on flax and other supplements, visit the website of the Office of Dietary Supplements, a part of the National Institutes of Health, at <http://dietary-supplements.info.nih.gov/>. *Kentz Willis, M.S., is the University Extension Educator in Nutrition and Food Safety for Sheridan and Johnson counties. He can be reached via email at kwillis3@uwyo.edu.*