

Flaxseed for your child: the flax facts

Marisa A. Silbernagel, Gundersen Lutheran registered dietitian

As consumers, we've heard about the health benefits of including omega 3 fatty acids in the diet. This poses the question: If it's healthy for adults, is it healthy for children too?

Flaxseed and other omega 3 fatty acids (fish, fish oil and nuts) help to lower your risk for developing heart disease. Omega 3 fatty acids help to lower LDL (bad) cholesterol, and raise HDL (good) cholesterol. Omega 3 fatty acids prevent some forms of cancer and are believed to boost immunity. Because of its high fiber content, flaxseed can also help relieve constipation and promote regular bowels. In children, research has shown that flaxseed can improve attention span, enhance memory and increase calm behavior.

If you are thinking about adding flaxseed to your child's diet:

1. Start with a small amount. For adults, one to two tablespoons per day is the recommended amount and is generally tolerated without side effects. For children (over the age of 7 to 8 months), start with a teaspoon and work your way up to a tablespoon. Progress as your child tolerates. Some pediatric resources recommend 1 teaspoon for every 35 pounds of body weight.
2. Be aware of side effects. All children react differently. One child may be able to tolerate a couple of teaspoons of flaxseed each day, while others may not. Side effects of the flaxseed may include runny stools, constipation, bloating and gas. If these symptoms arise, cut back on the amount of flaxseed and wait until symptoms have resolved before adding more.
3. Your child's digestive system is much smaller than yours. Adding fiber will result in a feeling of fullness that may prevent your child from consuming adequate calories. Adding fiber also increases the need for water to help move everything through the digestive system and reduce some of the side effects.

Tips for including flaxseed in your child's diet: Always use ground since whole flaxseeds are indigestible, even in adults. Add flaxseed to soft foods such as cereal, yogurt, cottage cheese, smoothies, and applesauce.

Since flaxseed is a heart-healthy, nutrient-dense food, we as dietitians, could only assume that it would be healthy for children. There is no documented research indicating any harmful effects or negative impacts on health. But, as with any fiber-rich food, slowly introduce flaxseed into your child's diet and watch for signs and symptoms of intolerance. Watch your child's food intake. If it dramatically decreases or your child starts to lose weight, flaxseed should either be reduced or eliminated.