

[IMAGE]

Health Benefits of Chia Seeds

By Julie T. Chen, MD

I recently had a patient bring in a large bag of chia seeds and asked if she could take that in her food on a daily basis or was chia seeds just a "fad." Needless to say, she hasn't been the only patient that's brought in chia seeds lately because it seems nowadays everywhere I turn, I see an article or advertisement about chia seeds. And the interesting thing about chia seeds is that it is far from being a new trendy food - in fact, it has been around for centuries. Even the Aztecs and Mayans knew about its health benefits and were regularly consumed. So, let's take a look at why it's been such a "fad" for so many societies throughout the centuries.

Chia seeds are high in soluble and insoluble fiber. As we know, fiber has been seen over and over in studies to be beneficial for colon health, weight loss, sugar control, heart disease, and cancers, just to name a few health benefits. Chia seeds also become a gelatinous form after sitting in water for a while so as it becomes that way in our stomach, it keeps us fuller longer. This is similar to the concept of other foods that are higher in fiber; high fiber foods slow digestion and allow us to feel fuller longer and prevent a rapid spike and dip of insulin that makes us feel like we have low blood sugar or feel really hungry.

Another health benefit of chia seeds is that it is rich in nutrients and minerals that help our body function at its optimum. It contains components such as calcium, iron, phosphorus, and niacin, just to name a few examples of ingredients found in this amazing seed that we can incorporate as a part of our daily nutritional needs. Many of these nutrients and minerals are essential for our hormonal functioning, muscle recovery, and even our energy level and blood pressure and cholesterol processing. So, by simply incorporating a spoonful of this into your daily diet, you are in essence taking a spoonful of a variation of Mother Nature's multivitamin.

Finally, chia seeds are rich in omega-3 fatty acids. As we have heard in the media and from our doctors, omega-3 fatty acids are important in our diet for numerous reasons that include, but are not limited to, healthy skin, memory preservation, heart health, weight maintenance/weight loss, and healthy hair. As you may already know, omega-3 fatty acids should be a part of our daily diet for these and many other health benefit reasons. And because we are all aware of this, but there is growing concern of too much fish consumption due to heavy metal exposure, these plant-based options can be a safer alternative.

For pregnant women who are concerned about consuming a lot of fish due to mercury intake, other safer ways to also increase healthy omega-3 fatty acids in your diet could be through moderate intake of chia seeds or ground flaxseeds. However, because plant-based omega-3 fatty acid components are somewhat different from what you would get in fish, consult your physician about getting the right balance of omega-3's so you can maximize health outcome for yourself and your baby.

So, now that we know chia seeds are a good idea for us as a part of our daily diet, how can we prepare it in our food?

Chia seeds have a nutty flavor that could be used similarly as flaxseed. You can sprinkle it in your cereal or on fruit. You can bake or cook with it as well. Some of my patients like to make their own organic whole grain bread and they will use this as a healthy source of minerals, nutrients, and omega-3 in their bread. You may even want to blend it into home-made hummus or shakes. The options for cooking are endless...and if you are noticing that you are running out of ideas as so many of us do with daily meal preparation...there are fortunately very helpful recipes now available online.

So, as we all continue onwards on our quest to living a healthier life and a diet that is more plant-based, let's keep chia seeds front and center on our mind because its health benefits truly are a gift from Mother Nature.

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