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# THE GOOD LIFE

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## Nutrition Notes:

### Fortify Your Diet with Seeds

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Bi-sek Hsiao

Seeds can be an important part of a healthy diet, providing essential nutrients that may be otherwise hard to get. Pumpkin, sesame, sunflower, flax, and chia seeds are a few of my favorites that I use all the time. I always top off a

spring salad with a sprinkle of seeds like sunflower, pumpkin, and sesame seeds. When I bake cookies, muffins, or energy bars, I like adding flax and other seeds. I often fortify oatmeal or other cereals and grains with sprinkles of seeds as well. Seeds are a valued recipe ingredient and condiment in my kitchen.

Adding seeds to your diet can be an easy way to add more fiber, healthy fats, protein, vitamins, and minerals through whole foods. Fiber is a star in chia and flax seeds; in 2 tablespoons, chia has almost 5 grams of fiber and ground flax seeds have about 4 grams. Most seeds have a good supply of unsaturated fats; heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids make up more than half of the fat content of chia and flax seeds. Protein is especially high in hemp and pumpkin seeds, about 9 grams in just 3 tablespoons. A substantial amount of magnesium is present in most seeds: just 3 tablespoons of hemp seeds provide 210 mg (50% average daily need), and 3 tablespoons of pumpkin seeds provide 156 mg (37% average daily need). Calcium is a highlight in sesame seeds, with 2 tablespoons providing 14% of the average daily need. The antioxidant vitamin E is high in sunflower seeds, with 2 tablespoons providing 30% daily need. Zinc, selenium, copper, and iron are a few other important nutrients that these edible seeds offer.

Along with filling nutrient gaps, eating seeds can offer health benefits. Flax seeds have been well researched, with studies finding benefits in reducing risks associated with heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and other metabolic issues. The combination of having high omega-3 fats (in the form of alpha-linoleic acid), fiber, lignans, and other antioxidant compounds have been found to help curb inflammation, reduce LDL cholesterol and triglycerides, support blood sugar control, and lower blood pressure. The fiber in flax seeds can also be helpful for preventing constipation and feeding beneficial bacteria in the colon to support the balance of gut microbes. Though there is less research on the other types of seeds, it is likely that the similar packaging of fiber, unsaturated fats, and antioxidant compounds in other seeds could also support cardiovascular health and other systems in the body.

You can usually find raw, unsalted, whole seeds without shells in the health food section of a grocery store. This is the form that I generally like to start with, although from time to time I do enjoy sitting around with others cracking shelled seeds with teeth

and savoring the slower, communal process of snacking on seeds. Some people like to soak seeds before eating to start the sprouting process, which makes some of the nutrients more available for the body to use. I enjoy roasting raw sunflower, sesame, and pumpkin seeds in a cast iron skillet on the stovetop or in the oven to bring out the nutty flavor. A simple handful of roasted seeds makes a nutritious and filling snack. For very small seeds like flax, chia, and sesame seeds, it is hard to chew them up well before swallowing, so I recommend grinding the seeds before using so they are better digested. A coffee grinder, food processor, or blender will work to grind up these seeds. Then you are ready to sprinkle the seeds on any food (e.g. yogurt, cereal, oatmeal, pudding, salad, vegetables), or add them to smoothies, baked goods, or stir-fry—the sky's the limit. You can make your own seed butter (like peanut butter) by grinding up seeds in a food processor along with a little olive oil; pumpkin, sunflower, and sesame make great seed butter. Or try making chia pudding by simply mixing chia seeds (whole or ground) with your favorite type of milk or other liquid (about 2 tablespoons of seeds for ½ cup liquid) and sweetener or other flavorings, then letting it sit for about 6 hours. When chia seeds soak in the milk, they expand in size, become gelatinous, and make a pudding consistency.

Since seeds are high in unsaturated fats, they

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are prone to rancidity if not eaten when fresh and stored properly. Purchase seeds from trusted sources, store seeds in cool, dark conditions, such as in the refrigerator or freezer until ready to use, and use them within a year.

People who are prone to inflammatory conditions in the digestive tract should be careful around using seeds. This includes people with inflammatory bowel diseases like ulcerative colitis and Crohn's disease, and diverticular disease (when tiny pouches prone to inflammation form in the intestinal wall). When not in a flare-up, having fiber in the diet, including from seeds, is generally supportive to the digestive system, encouraging regular bowel movements, enhancing stool consistency, establishing a healthy mucous lining in the colon, and reducing inflammatory risk. However, seeds should be avoided during a flare-up, since the fiber could be irritating when inflammation or infection is present. If you have a history of inflammatory digestive issues, grind up the seeds before eating them to help prevent unwanted irritation. If you are not used to eating a lot of fiber, introduce fiber-rich foods like seeds slowly to let your body adjust (a teaspoon or less a day) to prevent unwanted digestive discomfort. Finally, please note that sesame seeds are on the list of common food allergens in the U.S. and should be avoided when an allergy is present or suspected.

It's never too late to take steps to improve your diet and your health. Consider fortifying your diet by sprinkling some seeds on your next meal and reap the nutritional and health benefits of this simple step.