

Healing With Dr. Andrew Weil



3 Reasons to Eat Chia Seeds
Sprinkle these seeds on a salad to add healthy fats

Andrew Weil, MD

Q: "My friend told me that chia seeds are good for you and are loaded with omega-3s. Is this true?"

A: Yes, it certainly is. The word chia often conjures visions of those terra-cotta figurines that, when slathered with chia seeds, grow green "hair." In reality, these healthful, edible seeds are a better source of omega-3 fatty acids than flaxseed (the fats protect against inflammation and heart disease). Chia seeds come from the desert plant *Salvia hispanica*, a member of the mint family that grows in southern Mexico.

In pre-Columbian times, chia seeds were a component of the Aztec and Mayan diets and the basic survival ration of Aztec warriors; they even played a role in religious ceremonies. Supposedly, 1 tablespoon of the seeds could sustain a person for 24 hours.

The Aztecs also used chia medicinally to relieve joint pain and skin conditions. It was a major crop in central and southern Mexico well into the 16th century, but it was banned after the Spanish conquest because of its association with the Aztec "pagan" religion. Over the past few decades, commercial production has resumed in Latin America. And here is more good news: Insects hate the chia plant, so it's easy to find organic seeds.

Unlike flaxseed, chia seeds can be stored for long periods without becoming rancid and don't require grinding (whole flaxseed is tough to digest). Chia provides fiber (about 2 tablespoons--25 g--give you 7 g of fiber) as well as other important nutrients, including calcium, phosphorus, magnesium, manganese, copper, niacin, and zinc.

Very few formal studies have looked at chia's benefits, although I expect that more will soon. In a preliminary study from the University of Toronto, researchers fed 21 diabetics either a supplement made from chia or grains with similar fiber content. After 3 months, blood pressure in patients taking chia dropped (10 points diastolic, 5 points systolic) while the grain group's BP remained steady.

I enjoy the seeds' nutlike flavor and consider them to be a healthful and interesting addition to my diet. You can sprinkle ground or whole chia seeds on cereal, yogurt, or salads; eat a handful of whole seeds as a snack; or grind them up and mix with flour when making muffins or other baked goods.

Or make your own "chia fresca," a drink popular in Mexico and Central America: Stir 2 teaspoons of the seeds into 8 to 10 ounces of water (you'll end up with a slightly gelatinous liquid). Add lime or lemon juice and sugar to taste, and enjoy.

My prediction? You will begin to see chia being added to more and more commercial products, such as prepared baby foods, nutrition bars, and baked goods.
