

Chia seeds and nutrition ^[1]

Dear Alice,

What are the benefits of chia seeds? How many tablespoons should I eat per day to get those benefits?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Chia seeds may be small, but they've developed a big reputation over the years. They're edible seeds that come from the desert plant *Salvia hispanica*, which is grown in Mexico and dates back to Mayan and Aztec cultures. "Chia" means strength, and folklore has it that these cultures used the tiny black and white seeds as an energy booster. Chia seeds are packed with nutrients, and therefore thought to be a healthy addition to a balanced diet. In order to get the nutritional benefits, it's generally recommended to eat 20 grams of chia seeds (a little bit under two tablespoons), twice per day. However, the appropriate amount of chia seeds depends on several factors such as the consumer's age and health status.

So why all the hype? Chia seeds contain omega-3 fatty acids, carbohydrates, protein, fiber, antioxidants, phosphorus, magnesium, zinc, and calcium. One ounce (about two tablespoons) contains 139 calories, four grams of protein, nine grams of fat, twelve grams of carbohydrates, eleven grams of fiber, plus vitamins and minerals. Chia seeds can be eaten raw or cooked and can easily be added to foods, drinks, and baked goods. When mixed with water, the insoluble fiber in the seeds helps to form a gel, which, along with being a unique textural addition to a juice or smoothie, can help ensure regular bowel movements. To get the most nutritional benefit, try to steer towards chia seeds once they have matured and developed a black or white hue, as mature seeds contain 23 percent more essential omega-3 fatty acids than the brown, immature seeds.

People eat chia seeds to help manage diabetes, high blood pressure, and reduce the risk of heart disease and stroke. However, while chia seeds contain many key nutrients, there's not enough conclusive research to prove their connection to these positive health outcomes. Some folks have also tried using chia seeds as a weight loss aid, as the high fiber content is thought to suppress appetite, but there's not much support for this claim either. There are, however, studies

that show chia seeds can reduce certain risk factors for heart disease such as blood pressure, clotting factors, and inflammation.

When it comes to natural supplements, Reader, it's best to exercise some caution. If you have food allergies (especially to sesame or mustard seeds) or are on high blood pressure medications or blood thinners, ask your health care provider before adding chia to your diet. Also, eating chia seeds isn't recommended for pregnant or breastfeeding people, as little is known about the risks. It's also worth noting that chia seeds are high in alpha-linolenic acid, which in high doses may increase the risk of prostate cancer. All in all, chia seeds may be worth thoughtful consideration as a nutritious addition to many meal plans.

Happy snacking!

Alice!

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