


Introduction

Flax continues to surge forward in its recognition as a functional food. Functional foods deliver a health boost beyond what is expected from their traditional nutrient content (1). Flax fits this description perfectly, being rich in alpha-linolenic acid (ALA), the essential omega-3 fatty acid, and phytochemicals. Flax also provides dietary fibre and protein. Since the last edition of this primer was published in 2003, the role of flax in human and animal health has been noted in several areas:

- In 2004, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration allowed a nutrient content claim for omega-3 fatty acids – including ALA – on food product labels (2,3). U.S. consumers who want to increase their omega-3 fat intake can look to food labels for good sources of ALA (like flax) and foods prepared with added flax.
- The 2005 edition of the U.S. Dietary Guidelines for Americans cited flax as a plant source of omega-3 polyunsaturated fatty acids (4). The guidelines advise consumers to choose foods containing healthy dietary fats like the omega-3's.
- In 2005, nearly 200 new food and personal care products containing flax or flax ingredients were introduced in the U.S. market. Flax products can be found in baked goods, beverages, cereals, dairy products, spreads, prepared foods and snacks. Pets can benefit from flax food products and their owners can benefit from flax products in the food, healthcare and beauty and skin care lines (5).

- Producers continue to develop innovative flax feeds for livestock (6). Feeding flax to animals puts omega-3-enriched pork, poultry, dairy and egg products on the consumer's dinner table.
- New research strengthens the role of flax and its key nutrients in controlling inflammation and reducing the risk of chronic diseases like heart disease, diabetes and cancer.

Increased awareness of the health benefits of flax is good news for flax producers, especially Canadian flax growers, whose high-quality flax dominates world production. The role which flax is qualified to play as a healthy food is the subject of this book.