

9 Super Seeds Are Small but Mighty

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At the forefront of the 2015-2020 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* are recommendations to focus on varied proteins and heart-healthy monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats. Seeds provide all three of these nutrients and are plant-based sources of essential amino acids and minerals, including calcium, zinc, copper and magnesium — especially important in vegetarian and vegan diets.

Other benefits include dietary fiber, vitamins and phytochemicals. Seeds are linked to improved cardiovascular, digestive, immune and bone health; research suggests regular consumption of seeds may contribute to management of blood sugar and appetite as well as bone mineral density and may help lower risk for obesity and certain cancers.

Seeds by definition are a plant's unit of reproduction, and their sources are as diverse as their sizes and colors: Pepitas are the hulled seeds of a pumpkin. Chia is a member of the mint family. Beautiful flowering plants are the sources of poppy, sunflower, nigella and mustard seeds. Hemp is in the same botanical family as marijuana, but its seeds lack the high-inducing chemical tetrahydrocannabinol, better known as THC. Sesame seeds develop in triangular-shaped pods on plants that can reach 9 feet tall. And flaxseed comes from an annual herb also harvested for linen fiber.

More than fodder for a backyard bird feeder, seeds are a flavorful treat for people, too  — with each type offering unique nutritional benefits. They are great for snacking or added to yogurt and smoothies, grains, soups or salads for pops of color and crunch, but it's important to remember that moderation is key.

Choose raw and toast at home, if desired, to limit calories, oils, salt and other additives. Store "spice" seeds such as mustard, poppy and nigella in tightly sealed containers in the pantry away from heat and sunlight. To prevent rancidity and extend shelf life of seeds with higher oil contents such as flax, chia, hemp, pepitas, sunflower and sesame, store tightly wrapped in the refrigerator or freezer.

Chia seed



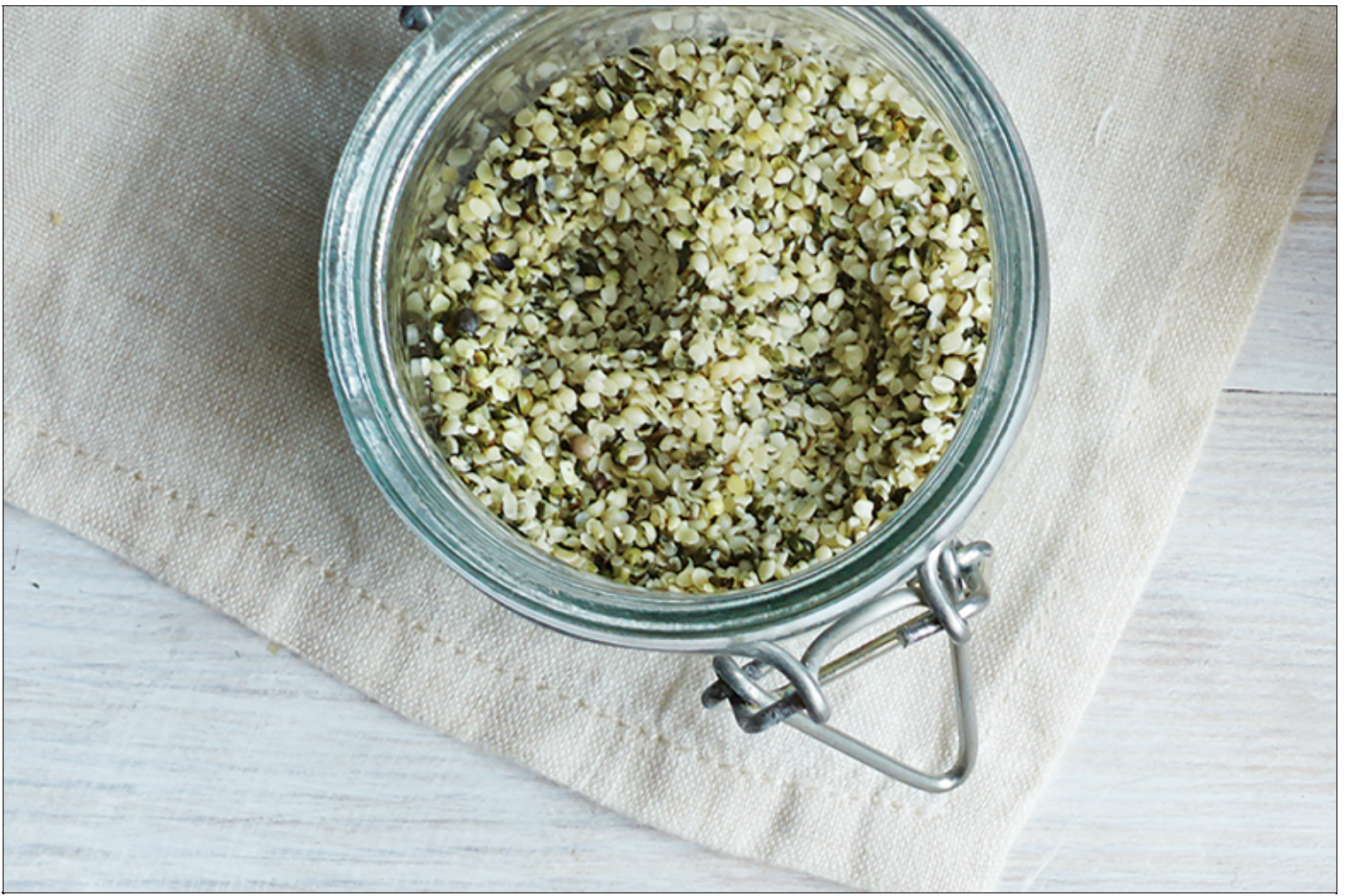
An excellent source of magnesium and a good source of calcium, this mild seed has nearly 10 grams of fiber, 5 grams of protein and more omega-3s than salmon per ounce. Use it as a crunchy topping or mixed with liquid to form a gel for an egg replacement, nutrient-rich drink or tapioca-like pudding.

Flax seed



Rich in fiber and heart-healthy omega-3 alphanolenic acid, flax seed (also called linseed) is one of the best sources of antioxidant plant lignans. There's little difference between golden and brown varieties of flax, both of which can be ground just before using to enhance absorption. Oil imparts a gentle toasty flavor to vinaigrettes.

Hemp seed



One of the few plant foods containing the proper proportion of all nine essential amino acids for humans, hemp seed has 10 grams of protein per ounce and is a good source of polyunsaturated fats. "Hearts" are shelled versions of this round seed with a texture similar to pine nuts and a mild grassy taste. Use hemp seed oil for finishing dishes or making vinaigrettes.

Mustard seed



The world's most heavily traded spice, yellow, brown or rarer black mustard seeds are all members of the family Brassica that includes cruciferous vegetables. Per ounce, mustard seeds contain 7 grams of protein and are a rich source of the antioxidant mineral selenium. Most commonly ground into mustard, this seed also is essential for pickling.

Nigella



The dull black seed of a flowering plant native to South Asia, nigella (also called charnushka) has almost 10 grams of fiber per ounce. Similar in appearance to black sesame with a bitter, smoky aroma and a nutty, peppery flavor, it's often used to top Middle Eastern, Eastern European or Indian breads.

Pepita



Pepitas (also known as pumpkin seeds) are an excellent source of monounsaturated fats, magnesium and phosphorous, and a good source of iron and zinc. Plus, they have more than 8 grams of protein per ounce. These vibrant green seeds are delicious roasted for a snack or used to top salads, soups and breads.

Poppy seed



Often seen on breads, or paired with lemon or beets, poppy seeds are an excellent source of calcium, a good source of iron and contain 5 grams of protein and nearly 6 grams of dietary fiber per ounce. The tiny bluish-black seeds also are a featured ingredient in Eastern European Christmas tortes.

Sesame seed



An excellent source of iron and calcium, sesame seeds (also known as benne seeds) are used whole in savory and sweet baking, ground into tahini or pressed for flavorful oil. Unhulled varieties are more nutrient-rich; black seeds have a toasty and smoky flavor.

Sunflower seed



Found inside black-and-white striped hulls, one ounce of hulled sunflower seeds is rich in vitamin E and is a good source of folate. With a low smoke point, sunflower oil can be used in cooking as well as salad dressings. Sunflower butter can be used as an alternative to peanut butter.

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