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Story | ANGELA AMBROSE

You might recognize them from the Chia Pet plant novelties of the '70s, but chia seeds have developed a new reputation as a superfood.

Packed inside the little chia seed is a nutritional powerhouse of omega-3 fatty acids, antioxidants, fiber and protein. The use of chia seeds for food and medicinal purposes dates back to the ancient Aztec and Mayan cultures, but only recently have Americans discovered their nutritional benefits. Chia seeds have the highest level of omega-3 fatty acids of any plant source, as well as a balanced amount of omega-6 fatty acids. Consuming these healthy fats may help reduce inflammation and the risk of heart disease.

While training for a

marathon, Chandra Davis started consuming chia seeds and noticed improvements in her endurance, recovery time and hydration. "It was the first food that I ever consumed where I physically felt better after about three or four days," says Davis, co-founder of Go Chia! Superfoods. "It was giving my body the nutrients it needed." Because chia seeds are loaded with protein, fiber and healthy fats, your body processes them more slowly, preventing spikes in your blood sugar level and giving you more sustained energy and a feeling of being full longer. Chia seeds are also an excellent source of calcium, magnesium and boron, which supports good bone health.

"Chia Seeds are so nutrient-dense, portable and easy to use," says Davis, who sells chia seed drinks, snacks and whole seeds. Unlike flaxseed, which must be milled to reap their health benefits, chia seeds can be eaten whole or ground without losing nutritional value. Their mild flavor lets them blend well with any food or drink. Sprinkle them on salads and cereals; mix them into yogurt, omelets and casseroles; or add them to baked goods.

Chia seeds help you stay hydrated. When added to liquids, they soak up water and create a gel consistency that adds a unique texture to smoothies, fruit juices and puddings while helping you stay hydrated.

Chia seeds' high level of antioxidants reduces free radical damage to the body, which might lower your risk of diseases. Antioxidants also act as a natural preservative, giving chia seeds a long shelf life without any deterioration in nutritional quality or flavor. ✦

DID YOU KNOW?

Chia seed oil helps hydrate and brighten your skin and strengthen your hair, according to Kelley Walker, co-founder of The Chia People. She recently introduced Chia Derm+ serum made with 100 percent chia seed oil. "It's a superfood for your skin," Walker says. "I slather it on from my hair to my toes." She recommends using it on everything from cracked heels and scars to eczema and psoriasis. Research published in the May 2010 "Annals of Dermatology" showed that chia seed oil improved dry, cracked skin in patients with severe pruritus.