Researchers discover hidden powers of prairie plant to lower blood pressure and significantly reduce risk of stroke, heart attack

BY KATIE PALMERS-BROOKS

For The Bulletin

If you have high blood pressure, adding ground flaxseed to your diet every day could reduce your risk of stroke by half and lower your chances of having a heart attack by 30 per cent, according to new findings by a U of M research team.

Lead investigator and physiology professor Grant Pierce says they were surprised to discover just how powerful flaxseed is at reducing blood pressure in people with heart disease. High blood pressure (or hypertension) is the leading cause of heart attack and stroke.

The participants in their study who ate 30 grams of ground flaxseed daily for six months showed the largest drop in blood pressure ever demonstrated by any dietary intervention.

Pierce says they experienced similar results to what you would expect from taking conventional anti-hypertension medication. Flaxseed has more punch than even the popular DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) diet, which is widely recommended by doctors across North America patients with hypertension.

“Honestly, we didn’t expect these effects to be as significant as they were. It took a while for us to realize what we had and now of course we’re pretty excited,” says Pierce, who is a principal investigator with the Canadian Centre for Agri-Food Research in Health and Medicine at St-Boniface Hospital. “These anti-hypertensive effects of flaxseed are among the most potent ever observed.”

The study involved 110 people, half of whom received a placebo. Neither the participants nor the researchers knew who belonged to which group. They were provided with bagels, muffins, bars, pasta and buns which had in them either flax or a placebo that looked and tasted like flax. They also had the option of sprinkling flax (or the placebo) on their meals.

Blood pressure is measured as systolic (the pressure when the heart beats) and diastolic (the pressure when the heart is between beats) and is expressed in millimetres of mercury (mmHg). After six months, in the flax group a notable increase in alpha linolenic acid (ALA), a healthy type of fatty acid, and enterolactone, a potent antioxidant, was observed. Researchers also detected increased slightly while diastolic was unchanged. Researchers also detected increased slightly while diastolic was unchanged.

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Pierce says they had the study participants follow the diet for 12 months and are still analyzing the data from the second half of the year. He believes the impact of these results will be far-reaching. For example, flax crops may be a viable solution for third-world countries who can’t afford to treat widespread hypertension with costly medications, Pierce says.

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