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BALANCED CHOICES
for a healthy lifestyle

Spice it Up for Health

Discover the New Health Benefits of Spices and Herbs

Spice Up Your Diet and Improve Your Health



Spices and herbs take on a new identity as scientists uncover a host of potential health benefits in the little spice jar in your pantry. Due to their plant-based origins and concentrated form, dried herbs and spices can be thought of as “mini salads.” The natural compounds they contain are similar to those found in fruits, vegetables, cocoa beans, red grapes and green tea. These include flavonoids, powerful antioxidants that protect cells from oxygen-damaging free radicals believed to play a role in the development of cancer, heart disease and Alzheimer’s disease. Some herbs and spices also contain antibacterial as well as anti-inflammatory actions.

Besides these actions in the body, there’s no question that using spices and herbs can enhance the flavor of food, often reducing the need for added salt, sugar and fat – an important health-promoting step on its own.

A Snapshot of Seven “Super” Spices

The science behind the spice

Ground Cinnamon – Helps regulate blood sugar

Cinnamon is recognized for its power to improve insulin sensitivity and help lower blood sugar levels. The equivalent of just one-half teaspoon of ground cinnamon twice daily before meals lowered blood glucose and cholesterol levels in one study. In another study, the equivalent of one teaspoon a day lowered fasting blood sugar levels in people with diabetes. Cinnamon added to rice pudding reduced a post-meal rise in blood sugar, according to a German study.

Ground Ginger- Relieves gastrointestinal symptoms

Derived from the ginger root, ginger has a centuries-old reputation for soothing an upset stomach and the nausea associated with pregnancy and motion sickness. Gingerols, the active and pungent component, may work like certain anti-inflammatory drugs (such as aspirin and ibuprofen) by inhibiting an enzyme that causes inflammation, according to some studies. Research indicates that ginger may offer pain relief for everything from arthritis to nausea and migraines.

Ground Red Pepper/Crushed Red Pepper/Paprika – Aid satiety; may speed metabolism

Capsaicin is the powerful compound in peppers that gives chilies their heat. The hotter the pepper, the more capsaicin and antioxidants it contains. Cayenne or ground red pepper contains the most. Yet all red peppers – including chili powder and the milder paprika – are surprisingly good sources of antioxidants. Adding some red pepper to your dish may also aid in weight management. Some studies have shown that when people added red pepper to their food, they ate fewer calories during that meal – and even during the next meal. Capsaicin appears to help increase satiety, or a feeling of fullness. Beyond helping you control your appetite, initial findings of some studies indicate that spicing up your meal with cayenne, chili powder and paprika can help boost your metabolism. Even milder, sweet red peppers have been found to increase calorie burning.

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Oregano Leaves – Inhibit bacterial growth; prevent inflammation

Of all the dried herbs, oregano has one of the highest antioxidant levels. Just one teaspoon of dried oregano leaves has as many antioxidants as three ounces of almonds and ½ cup of chopped asparagus. Rosmarinic acid, the active compound in oregano, appears to have the strong antioxidant activity. Many of the studies on oregano (literally translated, "joy of the mountain") have focused on the antimicrobial properties that help fight the growth of bacteria and parasites. Because of the high antioxidant level, researchers continue to explore the use of oregano in various food applications to inhibit bacterial growth. One lab study examined the antimicrobial effects of oregano on *H.pylori*, the bacteria associated with ulcers.

Rosemary Leaves – Prevent inflammation; fight cancer

This robust herb, a cornerstone of Mediterranean cooking, may help protect against oxidative stress and inflammation, both risk factors for cancer, according to evidence from animal and laboratory studies. A Kansas State University food scientist, motivated by a study showing that marinades made with rosemary, thyme and other spices could cut cancer-promoting compounds called heterocyclic amines (HCA) in grilled steak by 87%, tried rosemary extract alone. The rosemary wiped out any trace of HCA in cooked beef patties, without imparting a strong rosemary taste.

Thyme Leaves – Prevent inflammation; maintain cognitive function

Throughout history, thyme was believed to have certain medicinal properties and was used to help treat chest and respiratory problems. Now researchers believe thymol, and other volatile oils in thyme, may be responsible for a range of benefits. Some studies suggest the antioxidants in thyme could offer age-related benefits, such as helping to maintain cognitive function and promote heart health. According to animal studies, thyme oil works as a brain antioxidant, protecting polyunsaturated fatty acids and omega-3 fatty acids from oxidation as the brain ages. A teaspoon of this versatile herb contains about the same amount of antioxidants as a carrot or a ½ cup chopped tomatoes.

Yellow Curry – Reduce inflammation; promote heart health; improve cognitive function

Yellow curry powder is a deeply-hued spice that provides much more than color and flavor. It contains turmeric, a concentrated source of antioxidants – on par with strawberries, raspberries and cherries. A teaspoon of curry powder, which is a blend of turmeric and other spices, has as many antioxidants as ½ cup of red grapes. Emerging evidence suggests curcumin, the bright yellow compound in turmeric, may help inhibit the growth of cancer cells, reduce inflammation and safeguard the brain. In preliminary studies, curcumin helped thwart the development of destructive brain plaques. As a result, researchers believe yellow curry may offer the potential to protect against Alzheimer's disease. More exciting studies target heart disease and cancer. Canadian scientists gave curcumin to mice with enlarged hearts. Not only did it lower the incidence of heart failure (a common outcome of an enlarged heart), but it reversed the condition, restoring heart function. Curcumin also has the ability to stop tumor growth and promote tumor cell breakdown, particularly in colorectal cancer cells.



