

5 Spices for Better Health

Some spices are much more than just flavor enhancers.

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Variety is the spice of life, and enjoying a variety of herbs and spices may help you live a healthier life as well. Seasonings have been used since Biblical times to perk up the flavor of food; what's new is research showing that some of them can enhance your health.

The USDA estimates that the average American consumes 3.3 pounds of spices annually, but more than a quarter of that is black and white pepper and mustard seed (in prepared mustard). Mustard seeds contain lots of protective substances called phytochemicals, which may inhibit the growth of existing cancer cells and help prevent normal cells from turning into cancerous ones. Other herbs and spices, like the ones below, also have some amazing attributes. But remember, a little goes a long way: Too much of some of these can ruin a recipe and may not be ideal for your health.

Turmeric. This herb of the ginger family provides the yellow color in curries. It's a powerful antioxidant and has been used in Indian and Chinese medicine for centuries. Preliminary studies suggest it may help prevent or even treat Alzheimer's disease. In some Indian villages where turmeric is popular, there are unusually low rates of Alzheimer's.

Turmeric also enhances immune function, improves digestion and may reduce your risk of heart attack. Because of its anti-inflammatory properties, scientists are studying curcumin, one of the most active substances in turmeric, as a possible treatment for cystic fibrosis.

Ginger. Studies have demonstrated that ginger is effective in preventing the symptoms of motion sickness, especially seasickness. In addition, it can be useful in reducing the nausea and vomiting brought on by pregnancy. To get the stomach-calming benefits, simply steep an ounce or two of fresh gingerroot in a cup of hot water.

Ginger also contains an inflammation-fighting substance called gingerol, which may help reduce pain and improve function in people who have arthritis.

Rosemary. It contains substances that have an anti-inflammatory effect, which may improve immune function and circulation, and reduce the severity of asthma attacks. Used as aromatherapy, it may enhance memory and cognition.

Coriander. Also called cilantro, and often used in Mexican cuisine, coriander is rich in protective phytochemicals and is a good source of iron, magnesium and manganese.

Cinnamon. One of the oldest spices known, cinnamon seems to reduce inflammation, and recent studies show that it may also be especially beneficial for those with type 2 diabetes.

In one study, consuming less than a 1/4 a day reduced blood sugar in people with diabetes by about 20% and lowered triglycerides, LDL ("bad") and total cholesterol. In another, chewing cinnamon gum, or simply smelling the spice, improved attention and memory.

Cancer Fighters

In addition to all the healthful benefits we get from the seasonings listed above, some may also help ward off cancer or slow the growth of tumors. In a USDA review of 39 herbs, researchers found that oregano, dill, thyme and rosemary have some of the highest levels of cancer-fighting antioxidants. Other studies suggest that turmeric, sage, clove, ginger and chili pepper may help fight the killer disease. Remember that the next time you spice up your favorite dishes.

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