

Herbs and Spices: Potent Flavoring or Powerful Medicine?

by Elizabeth Braun, MS, RD

More than two thousand years ago Hippocrates, the father of modern medicine, said it best: “Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food.” While not a replacement for standard medical treatment, consuming more fresh herbs and spices can improve health by enhancing the over-processed, nutrient vacant, typical American diet. After studying 1,000 common foods, researchers published a list of 50 containing the highest concentrations of antioxidants. Antioxidants are the powerful substances in food that preserve and protect cells from damage associated with age-related health problems. Of the top 50, 13 were spices and herbs.

Many cultures around the world have long recognized copious use of seasonings provides flavor as well as health benefits. Herbs and spices transform ordinary fare into exotic delectables. These mysterious flavors and aromas, when combined with food, maximize taste and satiety without adding calories, salt, fat or sugar. Herbs and spices may be the answer to promoting a nutritious, delicious diet, while diminishing the ever-expanding American waistline.



Sage - Brain-booster

The green, mint-like leaves have been revered as a medicinal herb since the Roman Empire's glory days. It is no coincidence that “sage” describes a person of wisdom as the ancient Roman's knew this herb had memory-boosting capacity. Today our favorite stuffing seasoning has shown promising results in shielding brain tissue from the processes that lead to Alzheimer's disease. Like many other herbs, sage is bursting with phytochemicals that provide anti-inflammatory and antioxidant effects that are currently being studied. Sage seems to boost insulin action and reduce high blood sugar similar to the diabetes drug metformin. A favorite of vocalists and public speakers, lemon and sage tea with honey soothes irritated tissue and coats the throat to prevent hoarseness. Thanksgiving seasonings aside, sage is delicious infused in vinaigrettes and sprinkled on fresh endive salad. Chopped sage mixed in light cream cheese is a fabulous alternative to butter on artesian bread or simply use as a garnish on fish.



Basil - Anti-aging

This shiny green leafy herb contains volatile oils that provide a fragrant odor along with various medicinal effects. Recent studies show basil possesses strong antioxidant properties known to be effective in slowing down the cell degeneration responsible for aging, skin problems and some types of cancer. Potent plant pigments shield cells from damaging oxidation and negative effects of UV radiation. Basil oils reduce bacterial growth of resistant superbugs that cause food poisoning and infections. Don't limit basil to Italian dishes. Use basil pesto on sandwiches and burgers for a punch of flavor in place of fatty mayo or salty mustard. Basil leaves add zest to chili recipes. For a new twist, try fresh basil and strawberries on salad.

Ginger - Digestive aid

Although not technically an herb or a spice, this gnarly root is commonly found in Asian cooking and ginger ale. Ancient Asian and Indian cultures were familiar with its medicinal properties as an extremely effective treatment for nausea, gas and bloating. Taken beforehand, motion sickness, morning sickness and even chemotherapy nausea can be quelled. Today investigators are most intrigued by ginger's potential to reduce pain and swelling by blocking inflammatory substances called prostaglandins. These actions may aid arthritis treatment as well as tumor growth. Useful in both sweet and savory dishes, ginger and honey make a tasty tea. Grate it into a stir fry or thinly slice as a garnish for soups and salads.



Cayenne - Pain relief

Ground into red pepper or a component of crushed red pepper flakes seen in every pizza joint, cayenne gets its hot, spicy taste from capsaicin. Capsaicin is the oily substance behind most of cayenne's health boosting qualities. Pain relief is the most common, notably in psoriasis, headaches and arthritis. Capsaicin is a familiar ingredient in many over-the-counter pain reducing creams. Additional therapeutic effects include improved circulation and blood pressure as a strong anti-inflammatory. Researchers are investigating its role in cancer treatment, blood glucose stabilization and ironically, healing of gastric ulcers. Sprinkled on chicken soup cayenne provides a super-charged cold remedy shrinking blood vessels in the nose to relieve congestion. Add it to spice up veggies and pasta or as a colorful garnish for fish. For the very brave, a hint of cayenne in dark chocolate is a flavor adventure.





Cinnamon – Better blood sugar

Such a sweet treat on toast or oatmeal, it is difficult to imagine this benign brown powder as medicine. In fact, cinnamon hosts some of the most powerful healing effects of any spice. Known to improve blood sugar in diabetics, this famous bark owns one of the highest antioxidant levels in the spice world. So it's not surprising compounds in cinnamon may improve insulin function, cut triglycerides and prevent blood clots to promote heart health. The apple pie spice harbors antimicrobial properties that suppress the growth of E. coli and Salmonella bacteria responsible for food borne illness. The distinct aroma of cinnamon reduces stress and anxiety while increasing alertness. Go ahead and load it on fruit, yogurt and cereal. But don't be afraid to experiment adding it to savory dishes like chili and stews - for a pop of sweetness also add a dash of sugar.



Fennel – Appetite suppressant

A weed to most Americans, this crunchy aromatic herb grows along country roads and rivers in Europe. The tall fibrous stalks, similar to celery, are an exceptional source of fiber which may curb appetite and in turn, aid weight loss. Rich in volatile oils, fennel is a carminative herb meaning it can ease digestive spasms and gas. Toasted fennel seeds are often chewed after Indian meals to freshen breath. While some may be put off by the strong licorice-like sharpness, the feathery fennel fronds, when dried and paired with cilantro, add an interesting touch to salsa and soups. Sliced, fresh fennel bulbs and a tart green apple tossed with a splash of apple cider vinegar, olive oil, lemon juice, and a dash of sugar, salt and pepper makes a refreshing fall salad and is a popular on spa menus.

Remember, keeping herbs and spices fresh enhances their potency and taste. Stand fresh herbs upright in a glass of water in the fridge like fresh flowers for up to a week. Once dried, herbs and spices should be stored whole or ground in airtight containers away from heat and moisture in a cool, dark cupboard. While they don't generally spoil, the dried type will lose their flavor after about a year. That spice rack next to the stove? Ditch it. Any stored spices or herbs past the expiration date? Pitch them. It's time to go on an herb and spice adventure. While this list is far from complete, do some exploring and restock your pantry (i.e. medicine cabinet).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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Turmeric – Anti-inflammatory

Responsible for the prominent yellow hue of curry and mustard, turmeric has been used in ancient Indian medicine for centuries. The chemical providing the vivid golden color of turmeric, curcumin, has earned the attention of researchers as a compelling anti-inflammatory that has been proven to prohibit tumor growth. Just like broccoli and cauliflower, curcumin sweeps away carcinogens before they can damage cells. Studies have shown this substance is even slowing and repairing cancer cells. The anti-cancer compounds in turmeric with those in cruciferous vegetables are being tested together to measure their combined effect on prostate cancer. Curcumin may be more potent and safer than ibuprofen in reducing the inflammation of rheumatoid arthritis as well. If curry isn't appealing, try turmeric, but use sparingly. A little goes a long way. Turmeric adds a spicy bite to grilled chicken and provides zip to bland potato salad and rice dishes.

Oregano – Anti-bacterial

The ancient Greeks considered oregano a symbol of joy and used it to crown brides and grooms. Beyond its indispensable culinary use in Mediterranean cuisine, oregano boasts supernatural antiseptic powers offering protection against bacteria associated with food poisoning. The effective healing agents in oregano include thymol and carvacrol which along with 17 other chemicals, host tremendous antioxidant capacity. These volatile oils are being studied to determine their effectiveness in combating heart disease and cancer development.

It is common to find locals chewing a pinch of oregano after a heavy meal to relieve indigestion. Unlike other Italian seasonings, oregano blends favorably with hot spices making it popular in Southern Italy. A sprinkle of oregano and black pepper on scrambled eggs transforms a usually mundane dish. Add fresh oregano sprigs to high quality olive oil for an infusion to drizzle on salad or vegetables.

