

Spices and Herbs: Their Health Benefits

Everyday herbs and spices may do more than enhance the flavor of food.

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Common herbs and spices may help protect against certain chronic conditions, such as cancer, diabetes, and heart disease.

Herbs, including basil and parsley, are from plants and plant parts. Spices often come from the seeds, berries, bark, or roots of plants.

Seasonings, such as cinnamon, often lead lists of commonly eaten foods with the highest levels of measured antioxidant activity.

“Studies show that many different herbs and spices offer health benefits,” says David Heber, MD, PhD, professor of medicine, and director of the UCLA Center for Human Nutrition. Most of the evidence exists for cinnamon, chili peppers, turmeric, garlic, oregano, basil, thyme, and rosemary, Heber tells WebMD.

Polyphenols, a type of plant compound, provide one of the main health benefits associated with herbs and spices. Polyphenols are also abundant in certain fruits and vegetables, tea, and red wine.

Certain herbs and spices curb inflammation in the body, which may give rise to heart disease and cancer. For example, antioxidants in cinnamon have been linked to lower inflammation, as well as reductions in blood glucose concentrations in people with diabetes.

Savor the Flavor, Reap the Rewards

Liberally seasoning your food with herbs and spices may also help if you use them in place of other flavor boosters.

“Using herbs and spices expands your palette without extra calories and may decrease the amount of salt, fat, and sugar you use without sacrificing flavor,” says Kate Geagan, MS, RD, author of *Go Green, Get Lean: Trim Your Waistline with the Ultimate Low-Carbon Footprint Diet*.

The proposed Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2010 suggests that adults limit their sodium intake to 1,500 milligrams a day to manage high blood pressure and reduce the risk of developing the condition. If the guidelines are adopted, nearly all Americans will need to find alternatives to salt and other sodium-based additives.

Seasonings may even play a part in weight control.

“Tastier foods are more satisfying than bland ones, which you tend to eat faster, and with less fulfillment,” Heber says. If you’re not satisfied, you’re more likely to overeat. According to Heber, dihydrocapsiate, a compound in chili peppers, boosted fat-burning capacity when people ate it three times a day during a study. And a recent study in *Cell Metabolism* showed that consuming capsaicin, the ingredient in chili peppers that provides heat, lowered blood pressure in lab animals.

Maximize the Health Benefits of Herbs and Spices

Research about the therapeutic effects of herbs and spices is enticing, but how does it translate to what you eat every day?

Quite easily, as a matter of fact. It turns out that relatively small amounts of dried and fresh herbs and spices may have health benefits.

For example, Heber says it’s reasonable to expect benefits from 1.5 teaspoons of ground cinnamon. Spread it throughout the day to make it most palatable.

“Use herbs and spices at their peak to get the most out of them,” Geagan says. “The active compounds in herbs and spices degrade with time.”

Capitalize on the potency of dried herbs and spices by purchasing brands with “Best By” dates on them, and storing them in airtight containers away from heat, moisture, and direct sunlight.

Using fresh herbs or spices? Double the amount to get the same levels of active substances in their dried counterparts, Heber says.