

Spices for Health

Put Some Zest in Your Step

by Christine Gable

A kind word, a helping hand, a dash of the perfect seasoning. Modern science is now confirming what ancient cultures have known for a long time—spices are more than just an afterthought. For not only do they add zing to many a dish, they're high in anti-aging antioxidants and nutritional benefits. Yes, often it's the little things that mean the most.

Cinnamon

Cinnamon comes from the inner bark of evergreen trees native to Sri Lanka and Asia. Available in the curled quill form or ground powder, cinnamon is one of the oldest spices known, with a rich medicinal history in both the East and the West.

Health benefits: "Cinnamon is a tremendously powerful spice," states Roth-Rogoff. "It has recently been studied in regards to cholesterol and blood sugar. With cholesterol, evidence suggests that as little as 1/4 of a teaspoon per day can lower cholesterol significantly. In addition, regular cinnamon use can bring down elevated blood sugar levels, a risk factor for diabetes. It also tricks our bodies into thinking we've had something sweet, so many of my clients report fewer sweet cravings when they eat cinnamon treats. These benefits are particularly important as we enter middle age, when cholesterol tends to go up, as does the risk for type-2 diabetes."

And cinnamon is easy to incorporate into daily foods, like the baking that James McCall, an architect and 28-year member of the Rotary Club of Lancaster, PA, does. "I bake pies, cakes, fudge, and have tried scones—I do use a good bit of cinnamon and occasionally ginger in my baking." From poultry to fruit, cinnamon's warm, subtle flavor can boost many dishes throughout the day, from morning oatmeal and baked apples or pears, to hot tea with ginger and lemon—even beans or curries.

Ginger

The ginger ale in today's 2-liter bottles holds little resemblance to this original namesake, which hails from days when tavern owners set out ground ginger for sprinkling into one's ale. Yet this aromatic rhizome native to Asia and China still offers potent anti-inflammatory compounds (gingerols) today.

"Ginger is a wonderful addition to any diet," says Debbie Roth-Rogoff, Holistic Health Counselor and Director of Nutrition Within LLC, a wellness program based in Santa Monica, CA. "It is one of those power foods that I love - it's a little change that we can all make that brings strong health benefits to our bodies."

Health benefits: Ginger provides a positive punch to the immune system. Used to reduce pain in osteo and rheumatoid arthritis, ginger also soothes the digestive system. Best known for preventing motion sickness and nausea, ginger also reduces inflammation in the body, an important part of disease prevention. "Studies are currently examining inflammation in the body as the root cause of a number of different major illnesses, including heart disease, cancer, and strokes," says Roth-Rogoff.

Try using ginger either fresh or dried. While fresh yields more active enzymes—two ½-inch slices in hot tea with lemon are delicious and healthful—don't discount powdered gingerroot. Quick and convenient, it adds robust zing to stir-frys and sweet potatoes.

Cloves

With their distinctive spiked shape and warm, rich flavor, the small closed bud of the clove tree has been used in Asia for more than 2,000 years. Today cloves still tout intense flavor—plus multiple health benefits.

Health benefits: "Clove is an incredibly powerful spice," says Roth-Rogoff. "It contains an array of nutrients (including omega-3 fatty acids), anti-oxidants, and anti-bacterial and anti-inflammatory properties. For example, clove contains significant amounts of an active component called *eugenol*, which has made it the subject of numerous health studies, including studies on the prevention of toxicity from environmental pollutants, digestive tract cancers, and joint inflammation. If you want to boost your immune system and protect against cancer and inflammation in the body, use clove as a regular addition to your diet!"

When buying cloves, the nose knows. Good quality cloves will release a rich aroma and oil when scraped—freshness ensures the volatile key compounds are intact. Try adding a pinch of ground cloves to your coffee before brewing, sprinkle it in fruit-based desserts or simmer in soup stock. "Cloves also go well with ham," recommends McCall.

Turmeric

A member of the ginger family, turmeric touts a subtle, genial flavor; while commonly used in curry powder and mustard, turmeric's deep yellow hue can beautify many other dishes.

"What an amazing spice," says Roth-Rogoff. "Turmeric is commonly found in Indian foods, and it is often used in curry dishes (but it's not "hot" spicy). You can use turmeric in soups, as flavors for rice or beans, or with a marinade for grilling. Or make it simple and put turmeric and cumin on a chicken breast with a little limejuice, and sauté it in sesame oil for a great protein dish. No marinade required."

Health benefits: Turmeric's anti-inflammatory characteristics help protect bodies from free radical damage thanks to its yellow pigment, curcumin. In studies, curcumin has demonstrated benefits similar to drugs such as hydrocortisone and ibuprofen—with no toxic side effects. Turmeric may also act to prevent cancer and gallstones, prevent and treat Alzheimer's, ease hepatitis and cleanse the body of unhealthy fats.

3-Spice Pumpkin Pie

Mild yet flavorful, here's an easy, tasty way to incorporate the healthful effects of cinnamon, ginger and cloves into your autumn fare.

Prep time: 5-7 minutes

Bake time: 60 minutes

- 1 15-oz. can solid pack pumpkin
- ¾ cup sugar
- ¼ tsp. salt
- 1 tsp. cinnamon
- ¾ tsp. dried ginger
- ¼ tsp. cloves
- 1 egg
- 1 12-oz. can low-fat evaporated milk
- 1 9-inch prepared graham cracker crust (6 oz.)



Preheat oven to 425°F.

With electric mixer, blend together pumpkin, sugar, salt, cinnamon, ginger and cloves for about one minute. Add egg and mix well. With mixer on low speed, slowly pour evaporated milk into pumpkin. Mix well, about one more minute. Pour into graham cracker crust and bake for 15 minutes at 425°F. Lower heat to 350°F and bake 45 more minutes. Remove from oven and cool completely before serving. Serves 8.

Note: Depending upon the size and depth of the prepared crust, there may be a bit of filling remaining—pour into one or two small ramekins and bake for 25 minutes (in a hot water bath) alongside the pie. These small custards make a perfect snack.

Capsicum - Red Pepper & Paprika

The tropical plant family *Capsicum annum* includes members cayenne, the hot and spicy red pepper, and paprika, its milder yet seductive sister. With a 7,000-year history and extensive use as a folk remedy, both red pepper and paprika pack a powerful punch due to the compound capsaicin.

Health benefits: Studied in clinical research, capsaicin offers cardiovascular benefits, namely the ability to reduce blood cholesterol and prevent blood clots, and relieve arthritis pain. Lest you think that hot equals digestive upset, capsaicin actually enhances digestion for many, plus it lowers body temperature—a boon in tropical climates. Capsaicin has also been noted to increase the basal metabolic rate that stimulates the burning of fat for energy.

Red and green chiles are available whole—fresh or dried—and ground; paprika is generally dried and ground. Commonly found in chili powder, both cayenne and paprika add zing to bean dishes, sautéed greens and stir-frys.

Please note: People with a history of oxalate-containing kidney stones are cautioned against consuming large amounts of oxalate-containing spices such as cinnamon and ginger. Be sure to consult your healthcare practitioner first.