

9 – Spices - Better Health

9 Spices for Health, Energy and Longevity!

By Dr. Maoshing Ni - Oct 29, 2010

The colder weather is beckoning us back to our kitchens. Break out the spices to bring warmth, robust flavor, and a bounty of health benefits, including higher energy, increased immunity, and other life-enhancing surprises.

Considered to be dried seeds, fruit, roots or bark, spices have been valued for centuries by ancient cultures for their culinary and medicinal properties. For instance, a traditional Indian beauty trick was to spread turmeric paste on the skin to beautify it and prevent pimples. And Chinese doctors have used ginger since ancient times to cure aches and pains.

Here are some spices that you can start cooking with right away to elevate your longevity and health!

1. Garlic wards off heart disease:

In addition to warding off Count Dracula, garlic, the spicy favorite in Italian fare, has been shown to improve cholesterol and lower blood pressure. According to the National Health and Medical Research Council, consuming half to one clove of garlic daily may reduce cholesterol by nearly ten percent. Your breath might suffer, but your heart will thank you. As an antibacterial, garlic is often used to treat minor infections.

2. Spotlight on cinnamon:

Another ancient spice to recently come under scientific investigation is cinnamon. In the United States, cinnamon is usually thought of as the delicious spice in apple pie filling, but in other parts of the world, especially India and Asia, cinnamon has been used as a healing herb for centuries. Research is finally catching up to the wisdom of the East; many clinical studies have linked cinnamon consumption to lowered blood sugar. Both in vitro and human studies show improvement in insulin sensitivity with cinnamon polyphenols, as well as improvement in total and LDL cholesterol. Cinnamon is also thought to detoxify the system and stimulate brain function. Its antiseptic properties give it the ability to fight bladder infection, and if taken in the first 48 hours, a cup of strong cinnamon tea might just nip a bladder infection in the bud. Keep in mind that mixed study results make it difficult to prove these benefits on paper -- but it doesn't hurt to sprinkle a teaspoon into your next bowl of oatmeal.

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3. Curry for joint health:

Are your aching joints not jumping for joy in these autumn days? Try sprinkling some curry on your veggie omelet. Curry, a staple spice combo in Southeast Asian cuisine, contains turmeric, the yellow spice that gives curry its distinctive color. The active component in turmeric is called curcumin. If you are a fan of curry, you will be happy to know that this substance is associated with anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, anti-tumor, and anti-amyloid properties; amyloids are plaque-like proteins that build up in brain tissue, and are responsible for diseases like Alzheimer's and rheumatoid arthritis. In one randomized control study 107 patients with knee osteoarthritis received either 800 mg per day ibuprofen or 2 grams per day Curcuma domestica extract. Both groups showed improvement in pain on level walking and climbing stairs.

4. Star Anise aids digestion:

As the name suggests, star anise is indeed star-shaped. Though it is not actually related to anise, star anise shares a similar licorice flavor, due to its content of anethole. Used to bring out flavor in slow-cooked meat dishes and long-simmered soups, this spice frequently makes an appearance in Indian cuisine and is an ingredient of the traditional five-spice powder of Chinese cooking. Star anise has been used in a tea to remedy rheumatism, and the seeds are sometimes chewed after meals to aid digestion.

Special combinations of spices and herbs can bring you a powerful immune zoom; one that includes star anise in the mix is the 5 Elements of Health, which promotes a strong immune function and balances the energies of your whole body.

5. Cardamom improves energy:

Found in curries, rice dishes, herbal teas, and breads, cardamom is the spice that gives chai tea its main flavor. In Asia, cardamom has long been valued medicinally for its ability to increase circulation and improve energy. Considered an aphrodisiac in the Middle East, cardamom may also improve digestion, asthma, bronchitis, halitosis, and even help improve a bad mood.

6. Clove curbs cramping:

A delicious addition to cooked fruit, roasts, sweet vegetable dishes, and teas, clove has been used since ancient times in India to improve digestive function. You may chew on some to alleviate toothaches, sore throats, diarrhea, and stomach cramps.

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7. Cumin boosts immunity:

An excellent addition to meat curries, stews, vegetables, seafood, and sauces, cumin is thought to boost the immune system and also to improve liver function, reduce flatulence, and aid in digestion.

8. Fennel Seed soothes your intestines:

Often used to spice up recipes with meat, beans, or legumes, fennel helps digestion in two ways: It stimulates the production of gastric juices and also soothes the nervous system, regulating the action of the muscles that line the intestine.

9. Ginger: Remedies aches and nausea:

A perfect compliment to vegetables, marinades, and sweets, ginger is also delicious in tea. Ginger may help relieve nausea, arthritis, headaches, menstrual cramps, and muscle soreness.

A word of warning: always discuss with your physician before treating conditions with spices to avoid any adverse interactions; for example, because garlic and ginger possess natural blood-thinning properties, individuals about to undergo surgery and those taking blood thinners should take extra precaution.

To maintain peak flavor, use spices within six months -- but the spice police won't come knocking at your door if you keep them longer. They like to hang out in a cool, dark place in your pantry to preserve their oils and prevent loss of pungent flavors.

You can find many more tips about life-lengthening foods in *Secrets of Longevity: Hundreds of Ways to Live to Be 100*, now available on Kindle.

I hope you can use spices to make the most of your meals and your health! I invite you to visit often and share your own personal health and longevity tips with me.

May you live long, live strong, and live happy!

—Dr. Mao

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