

Using a World of Spices

Perk up your plate with these healthful additions

Many Americans would do well to take cues from ethnic cuisines that make liberal use of spices to enhance the natural flavors of food. These zesty additions not only cut down on the tendency to overdo it with salt or fat, but also provide powerful antioxidants and phytonutrients. Here are four spices that I strongly suggest adding to your pantry, with recommendations from Tieraona Low Dog, MD, editorial and advisory board member of the American Botanical Council and director of the fellowship at the Arizona Center for Integrative Medicine.

CAYENNE (*Capsicum* spp.)

Cayenne and red pepper flakes get their heat from the compound capsaicin. Traditional in Latin American cooking, this spice also commonly appears in Chinese (Szechuan, Hunan), Southeast Asian, African, and Indonesian dishes.

Benefits: Capsaicin may help kill cancer cells and keep them from proliferating; preliminary studies indicate it disrupts cancers of the brain, liver, prostate, and skin, among others.

To use: Add to chili and stews, poultry, eggs, and barbecued foods.

GINGER (*Zingiber officinale*)

Often called “ginger root,” this spice is actually made from a rhizome, or underground stem. It’s used extensively in Chinese, East Indian, Japanese, Middle Eastern, and Thai cooking, and in many Caribbean dishes.

Benefits: Traditionally, it has been used as an antiemetic (for nausea), anti-inflammatory, circulatory stimulant, and digestive aid. Research confirms that dried ginger helps to quell morning sickness and chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting. Fresh ginger is favored for treating colds, coughs, and congestion.

To use: Use the freshest ginger for a cleaner, milder taste. Add half at the beginning of cooking and the rest at the

end, so you get both medicinal effects and flavor, suggests Dr. Low Dog.

CINNAMON (*Cinnamomum* spp.)

Cinnamon stars in savory dishes in the East and sweets in the West. There are several species, including the grocery store staple cassia. While experts don’t know if true cinnamon (Ceylon, or *C. zeylanicum*) is more medicinally potent than cassia, herbalists generally prefer it, says Dr. Low Dog. Specialty or natural-foods stores may specify the type used.

Benefits: Research shows both Ceylon and cassia cinnamon lower blood sugar in people with type 2 diabetes. Studies also indicate that it reduces cholesterol. And it helps calm stomachs: “My family uses it as an antiemetic since my kids prefer its flavor to ginger,” says Dr. Low Dog.

To use: One-half to 1 teaspoon per day benefits blood sugar and cholesterol levels. Add to smoothies, oatmeal, or yogurt. To calm an upset stomach, stir 1/8 teaspoon into 1/4 cup applesauce two to three times a day.

TURMERIC (*Curcuma longa*)

This fragrant yellow spice, popular in Indian curries, contains the powerful compound curcumin, and its antioxidant and anti-inflammatory effects benefit a wide range of conditions.

Benefits: Studies show it’s helpful for inflammatory bowel disease and may protect against colon cancer. Turmeric may also boost cognitive performance, and early studies suggest it could prevent and break down Alzheimer’s brain plaques. In fact, high turmeric intake may account for the low incidence of dementia among elders in parts of India.

To use: Add a teaspoon to soups, rice dishes, sauces, and marinades. To enhance absorption, eat turmeric with healthy fats or combine with black pepper.

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This monthly column on nutrition is produced in collaboration with the Arizona Center for Integrative Medicine. For more information, visit its website at integrativemedicine.arizona.edu.