

Spice Up Your Healthy Meals

Many times you hear spices and herb in one sentence and think of them as the same when actually they are not. Spices are aromatic seasonings from the bark, buds, roots, seeds, berries or fruit of various plants and trees. Common spices include cinnamon, which comes from bark; cloves from buds; ginger from a root; cumin from seeds; black peppercorns from berries; and paprika from the fruit of a plant. Herbs, however only come from the leaf of a plant. Popular herbs include basil, oregano, rosemary thyme, sage and chives.

Herbs and spices offer health benefits in addition to flavoring food, but there are currently no specific recommendations for how much to include in your diet. They:

- Contribute to lowering sodium intake when used to flavor food in place of salt.
- Offer protective antioxidant benefits by destroying free radicals that can cause cell damage. Herbs and spices carry even higher antioxidant content than fruits and vegetables.
- Provide anti-inflammatory protective benefits against many chronic diseases including heart disease, cancer, diabetes and Alzheimer's disease.

The benefits of combining multiple herbs and spices are often greater than the benefit of a single one. One research study found that turmeric and black pepper together decreased breast cancer stem cells. Herbs and spices added to salad dressing increase the antioxidant content of a vegetable or fruit salad.

When finding ways to add herbs and spice to your diet, using fresh is best, but dried herbs and spices may be more convenient. Fresh herbs have higher antioxidant levels than the dried versions. Fresh garlic, for example, has one and a half times more antioxidants than garlic powder. Replace dried herbs and spices in your kitchen each year to maximize their flavor and health benefits.

Not only will your cuisine taste good when flavored with spices and herbs, it will be good for you. Though the research is still inconclusive in terms of which and how much of a specific herb or spice to include in your diet, be adventurous and try new seasonings.

Here are some potential health benefits of several common herbs and spices:

- Curry powder is a golden yellow spice. The curcumin in turmeric, the primary ingredient in curry powder, has been shown to reduce the risk of developing diabetes in obese mice. In other animal studies curcumin has been shown to lower the incidence of heart failure and stopping the growth of cancer cells. There is also evidence it may protect against arthritis and Alzheimer's disease. Perk up chicken salad and steamed rice with a

sprinkle of curry powder along with nuts and chopped fresh or dried fruit also considered super foods.

- Rosemary added to meat marinades may block heterocyclic amine or dangerous carcinogens from forming during cooking. Rosemary was also found to cut the HCA in grilled steak by 87 percent; the meat did not have a strong rosemary flavor. The aroma of rosemary has also been linked to improve moods and help manage pain. Add rosemary to sautéed vegetables or sprinkle over baked bread brushed with olive oil.
- Cinnamon stirred in oatmeal, sprinkled on toast or over coffee, or mixed into a streusel topping for a fruit crisp may contribute to lowering blood sugar for those with diabetes or metabolic syndrome from the polyphenols which are naturally present. There is some evidence cinnamon may also lower triglycerides and cholesterol.
- Capsaicin in cayenne, crushed red pepper flakes and paprika may be helpful to those looking for a metabolism boost for weight loss. The spicy red peppers in prepared foods may make them less tempting to those prone to overweight and contribute to the feeling of satiety. When creating your own spiced dry rub for grilled meats include cayenne or paprika. Sprinkle crushed red pepper flakes over your favorite pizza.