Spice Up Your Life

Packed with disease-fighting compounds and antioxidants, these three herbs and spices add more than flavor to your winter meals.

December 3, 2008 By Goulda Downer, RD, PhD

Besides enhancing the flavor of food, many spices and herbs possess medicinal qualities. Our ancestors used them to relieve pain and, in general, boost the body's disease-fighting capabilities. Current research proves what our forefathers have known for centuries: that spices are potent sources of anti-inflammatories, phytochemicals, antioxidants and other effective compounds that help prevent and manage chronic diseases. Because of this—and the research to back it up—some spices and herbs are now available as supplements.

Spices can come from almost any part of a plant including seeds, leaves, barks, rhizomes, latex, stigmas, floral buds and modified stems. Dried or fresh, these flavorful botanicals can punch up the flavor of any dish without adding appreciable amounts of calories, fat or sugar.

Whether you're a chef or a weekend cook, you can partner with your spice rack to prevent and treat disease. Most of us already enjoy a variety of spices in our favorite soups, stews, salads, barbecues and treats.

Ginger, cayenne (pepper), garlic, basil, turmeric, rosemary, thyme, oregano, cloves, paprika, cinnamon, sage, bay leaf, mustard, nutmeg and onion, just to name a few, can add pizzazz to your culinary skills. Which ones do you already have? Be adventurous during these cold winter months and add others to expand the repertoire of color and flavor to your meals—and as a bonus reap the health benefits.

I have chosen three of my favorites to add to your winter cabinet as we hibernate this year. They are cinnamon, turmeric (a component of curry) and garlic.

Cinnamon

This spice readily evokes images of hot cinnamon rolls and spicy warm beverages on a cold winter's night. It's commonly used in home remedies to soothe bloating, expel gas and ward away indigestion and diarrhea. It has antimicrobial and anti-inflammatory properties. This simply means that it helps stop the growth of bacteria as well as fungi, and it stops blood from clotting, which improves circulation. In fact, recent studies indicate that cinnamon may improve type 2 diabetes and insulin resistance. One study found that ingesting just one half teaspoon of cinnamon daily

may help lower blood glucose levels as well as LDL “bad” cholesterol and blood pressure.

Cooking with cinnamon is easy. Purchase this readily available spice as ground powder or as dried sticks. Add it to savory as well as sweet dishes.

Quick tip: Get started today and jazz up your coffee with ¥ teaspoon of cinnamon. Sprinkle some in oatmeal, cereal and soups, or use as a rub on meats.

Cinnamon Salmon Steaks
2 salmon steaks, 4 inches
¥ teaspoon each: ground cinnamon, freshly ground black pepper, chili powder, salt
1 teaspoon brown sugar
Juice of 1 small lemon
1 tablespoon olive oil

Brush fish with lemon juice then drizzle with olive oil. Blend all spices and rub on fish. Place fish in refrigerator and let marinate for about 15 minutes. Remove and place on grill or in a lightly greased baking dish in the oven for 12–13 minutes. Bake at 400° until fish flakes easily. Serve with steamed collards, julienne carrots and rice pilaf for a sumptuous feast.

Cinnamon Bread Pudding
4 cups 2-day-old cinnamon bread,torn into small pieces
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
1 teaspoon ground nutmeg
1 large Granny Smith apple, peeled, cored, very thinly sliced
¥ cup crushed pineapple
¥ cup chopped walnuts or chopped dried cranberries (optional)
1 cup whole milk
1 cup cream
1 cup brown sugar
3 tablespoons butter
1 tablespoon vanilla

Butter an 11 by 7 inch baking dish, and heat oven to 350°. Fill a large shallow baking dish halfway with water and put on last rack of oven. In a large bowl, combine bread, cinnamon, nutmeg, apple slices, crushed pineapple (and chopped nuts and dried cranberries). In a medium saucepan, combine milk, cream, brown sugar, butter and vanilla then heat over medium heat until hot and butter is melted. Pour hot milk mixture over the bread. Stir to mix well. Pour bread mixture into the prepared baking dish. Set the bread pudding pan inside the larger pan of water already inside the oven. Bake for 40 to 50 minutes, or until a knife inserted near center comes out clean.

Turmeric
If you love curry dishes, then you’ve been enjoying the spice turmeric. The major substances that give turmeric its yellow color are called curcuminoids. Curry powder also typically includes other

spices, such as coriander and fenugreek. Research shows that turmeric contains powerful antioxidants and anti-inflammatory compounds. It is also considered nature's antiseptic and is an antibacterial agent. Turmeric's rapidly growing popularity is due in part to its numerous health benefits. Ongoing research shows that turmeric may help lower cholesterol levels and prevent the buildup of fatty deposits in the arteries, which can lead to heart disease. Other studies link it to effective treatments of a variety of illnesses, including Alzheimer's disease and even cancer (curcumin, an active ingredient in turmeric, may inhibit certain types of cancers from replicating and spreading).

Turmeric is also used as a food coloring in such products as cheese, butter and baked goods and is one of the primary ingredients in curry. Zest up a bland egg salad with a pinch of this spice—it will add color and flavor.

Quick tip: Use it in salad dressings, puddings, rice, sauces or dips. Sauté some apples with turmeric, or add to beans and sauces. Cruciferous "cancer-fighting" vegetables, including cauliflower, cabbage, broccoli and brussels sprouts, go well with turmeric. Sprinkle vegetables with turmeric then sauté in a little olive oil or broth. Season to taste.

Turmeric Pumpkin Soup
2½ pounds pumpkin (squash)
1 small onion, chopped
2 tablespoons olive oil
1 teaspoon fresh ginger
1½ teaspoons minced garlic
¥ teaspoon cumin
1 teaspoon ground coriander seeds
½ teaspoon turmeric salt and ground white pepper to taste
3 cups water or vegetable/chicken broth
¥ teaspoon brown sugar

Heat oil in large saucepan, add onion and garlic; cook, stirring frequently until tender. Add peeled, seeded and diced pumpkin, turmeric, cumin, ginger and coriander seeds. Add water/broth and sugar, bring to a boil. Cook on low heat, stirring occasionally for 25–30 minutes until pumpkin is tender. If desired, add mixture to blender or food processor. Blend until smooth and serve.

Garlic
It may not do much for your breath, but perhaps no other herb can do more for your heart's health than garlic. More than 1,000 clinical trials have been conducted on the medicinal use of garlic. And studies show that lab animals given allicin, one of garlic's active ingredients, developed fewer fatty deposits in their arteries. Clinical studies in Germany as well as Oxford University in England show that taking 600 to 900 milligrams of dried garlic powder daily for a month reduced cholesterol levels by 12 to 18 percent.

Studies show that garlic's medicinal properties are most beneficial when it's eaten raw, crushed or

chopped. (If you prefer cooking garlic, first let it stand for 10 minutes after crushing or chopping.) But to reap the health benefits, you must eat as much as five to 10 cloves each day. While this prospect may drive away your friends, garlic supplements are a welcome and odor-free alternative. As a reminder, people taking aspirin or other anticoagulant drugs should talk to their doctors before taking the supplement because garlic is a blood thinner.

Quick tip: Use as much or as little as desired to flavor mayonnaise and butter.

Garlic Stir-fry Vegetables
1 pound zucchini, cubed
2 medium carrots, julienne style
1 each small yellow, green, red bell pepper, cut into strips
½ head purple cabbage
3–4 large garlic cloves, minced
1 medium onion, sliced
¥ teaspoon finely minced ginger
2 tablespoons olive oil

Place oil in a wok/frying pan over medium to high heat. When hot, add the carrots, stir-fry 1–2 minutes. Add all remaining vegetables and continue to stir-fry for another minute or until vegetables are crisp tender. Push the vegetables to the side of the pan. Add ginger and garlic and cook for 1 minute until the oils are released. Quickly toss to coat vegetables with ginger and garlic.

Words to live by…
Eating a healthy diet is important for general good health. Using more herbs and spices is a step in the right direction. Be creative, be adventurous, but take small steps. Find an herb or spice that you like and incorporate it into as many of your meal plans as possible. But, remember, like everything else in life, too much of a good thing can be harmful—and this holds true when using herbs and spices. They can provide more health benefits than you ever expected from your pantry, but a small amount goes a long way.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.realhealthmag.com/article/spices-cooking-health-15714-1688