



5
HEALING
HERBS
AND
SPICES

Turn your kitchen into a medicine cabinet with these natural “medicines.”

by KARLA WALSH



Fire Buster

Don't stop with this list. Your spice cabinet is full of healthy options.

A SPOONFUL OF SUGAR

may help the medicine go down if you ask Mary Poppins, but a spoonful of cinnamon can offer wellness wins more similar to actual medicine. "All herbs and spices come with some health benefits, and some are proven to help reduce inflammation," says Mary Stewart, RD, LD, a registered dietitian and the founder of Cultivate Nutrition in Dallas. While the amounts called for in recipes aren't usually enough to be "therapeutic doses," Patricia Bannan, MS, RDN, a registered dietitian nutritionist in Los Angeles and the author of *From Burnout to Balance*, says the repeated use of the herbs and spices definitely adds up over time.



For the general population, focusing on spices and herbs in their natural form (fresh, dried and ground) is a safe and health-promoting approach. While you can score a potent dose in a matter of seconds via supplements, the dosage is often far higher, and might interact with other medicines or impact certain health conditions. And, since the Food and Drug Administration doesn't regulate them, supplements may not live up to their claims, and might not even be safe (see "Choosing Wisely," far right). Plus, you'll be missing out on the synergistic effects herbs and spices have when consumed with foods—something that's hard to study in the lab. Some spices are fat-soluble and are much more bioavailable, or able to be absorbed and used by the body, to aid in inflammation relief and other health-promoting activities, when consumed with other foods, herbs or spices. (See: curcumin.)

In food form, herbs and spices are easy to use, affordable, flavorful and nearly risk-free (check with your doctor to confirm your current medications play nice with spices).

To inspire yourself to make the most of the spice cabinet MVPs here, Stewart suggests making them visible. While your coffee brews, choose three different herbs or spices you can add to your meals each day: one each for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Put them on the counter where you can't miss them, and select a new trio the next day.

"Adding spices and herbs to your daily meals will become a habit, and that will create a compounding effect and help to elevate your health," explains Stewart.

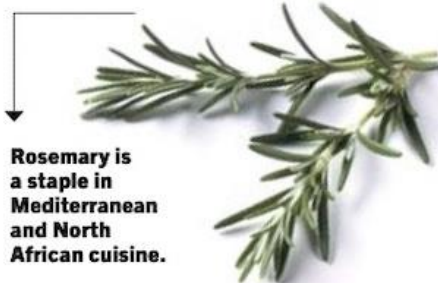
1 Cinnamon
Our taste buds know and love cinnamon from Mom's apple pie and gooey, fresh-from-the-oven rolls. And our body digs it for its "medicinal properties, including supporting blood sugar control and heart health and reducing inflammation," Bannan says. These benefits are due to E-cinnamaldehyde and o-methoxycinnamaldehyde, two potent chemicals in the warm, woodsy and citrusy spice. A September 2020 study published in the journal *Complementary Therapies in Medicine* found that consuming cinnamon may help lower levels of C-reactive protein, a marker used to measure inflammation. Sprinkle it over oatmeal, in smoothies or add it to everything from baked goods to fruit salads to savory stews.

YOUR SPICE Rx ½ teaspoon per day

2 Rosemary

Don't reserve those sturdy, woodsy stems for garnishes alone.

According to Roxana Ehsani, MS, RD, CSSD, a Miami-based board-



Rosemary is a staple in Mediterranean and North African cuisine.

certified sports dietitian, rosemary contains rosmarinic and carnosic acids, two polyphenolic compounds that have anti-inflammatory benefits and fight off potentially cancer-causing free radicals. When you prepare your meat or fish with a marinade featuring rosemary, you can reduce or even prevent the formation of HCAs (heterocyclic amines), possibly carcinogenic chemicals that can form during high-heat cooking of meat, according to research done at Kansas State University.

In addition to infusing it into marinades and salad dressings, rosemary is stellar chopped and folded into bread or pizza dough, as a sauce seasoning or tossed with potatoes or veggies prior to roasting.

YOUR HERB Rx 1 tablespoon fresh or 1 teaspoon dried per day

3 Chili Peppers

Some like it hot and that heat comes in part from a compound called capsaicin. Whether you enjoy



Who knew? Crushed red pepper contains fiber!

Fire Buster

You can use ginger in a compress for arthritis pain and swelling.

jalapeños, serranos, poblanos, or cayenne pepper, you may notice less joint pain and tenderness thanks to this spicy compound. It has pain-relieving and anti-inflammatory benefits, Bannan confirms, which can be especially important for those with arthritis and muscle aches.

Capsaicin appears to activate a certain receptor on sensory neurons that impacts feelings of fatigue and pain, according to a January 2022 study in the journal *Nutrients*. To get your fix, toss sliced jalapeños (remove the seeds and ribs for less kick) into fruit salsa or guacamole, add a dash of cayenne pepper to a skillet or sheet pan meal, enjoy a sizzling platter of pepper-centric vegetable fajitas or drizzle hot sauce over tacos, eggs or grain-and-veggie bowls.

YOUR SPICE Rx $\frac{1}{4}$ *teaspoon cayenne pepper per day*

4 Ginger

Much more than a character on *Gilligan's Island*, ginger can be a godsend for anyone experiencing menstrual cramps, achy muscles or osteoarthritis, Ehsani says. That's because the stubby, spicy and pungent root, as well as the dried powdered form, contain bioactive molecules (gingerols, shogaols, paradols and zingerone) that can chill out inflammatory genes and decrease levels of C-reactive protein, according to a November 2020 meta-analysis published in the journal *Cytokine*.

Peel and grate fresh ginger root into stir-fries or pasta sauces, or

sprinkle powdered ginger into smoothies, quick bread batter or cookie dough.

YOUR SPICE Rx $\frac{1}{2}$ *teaspoon fresh grated ginger or ginger powder per day*

5 Turmeric

As a plant cousin to ginger, it's no wonder this much-researched root has calming properties too. "Not only does the polyphenol curcumin give turmeric its golden color, but it also offers anti-inflammatory properties that may help with a number of health conditions, including heart disease, Alzheimer's disease and cancer," Bannan says.

Scramble ground turmeric into eggs before cooking, or stir it into pancake batter, soups or rice side dishes. Whenever possible, pair it with a source of fat and pepper (which contains piperine); two factors that help your body put it to best use. Adding a small pinch ($\frac{1}{20}$ teaspoon) of black pepper to a turmeric recipe has been shown to significantly enhance its bioavailability.

YOUR SPICE Rx $\frac{1}{2}$ *teaspoon turmeric powder per day*

Choosing Wisely

Dried herbs and spices are packed with nutrients, but some may also be loaded with things that aren't so good for you: heavy metals. A 2021 investigation by *Consumer Reports* looked at 126 different spice products from both store and national brands, including organic versions, and found that 40—almost a third—of them had levels of heavy metals, such as lead, that were high enough to pose health concerns for children and even adults in some cases. Thyme, basil and oregano were the biggest offenders.

While the FDA does oversee herbs and spices, it hasn't set limits for heavy metals and the policing of imports (most spices come from outside the U.S.) is lax or nonexistent.

So what can you do? First, grow your own. It's so fun to go to your own garden (however tiny) and snip fresh herbs for a meal. Second, buy from trusted brands, even though that doesn't guarantee they'll be lead-, mercury- or cadmium-free. But you can ask them about their sourcing and quality control. Lastly, according to *Consumer Reports*, the following herbs and spices had the lowest levels of heavy metals: black pepper, coriander, curry powder, garlic powder, saffron, sesame seeds and white pepper. —Janet Lee

Curcumin helps block inflammatory cytokines.