

# Potent spices add a flavor punch and protection against disease

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Look no further than your own spice rack to help protect against chronic diseases like heart disease and cancer.

Herbs and spices not only punch up food's appeal, but they can also boost your immune system to help fight disease. Some herbs and spices have specific benefits, such as calming an upset stomach or aiding in blood sugar control.

It's no coincidence that in countries such as China and India, where many dishes feature a veritable medicine chest of colorful, powerful herbs and spices, have lower rates of many chronic diseases.

These potent plant flavorings, which are naturally void of sodium, sugar and fat, also help keep food from spoiling due to their anti-microbial properties.

Spice up your diet with EN's top 5 picks:

## Tumeric

Derived from the plant *Curcuma longa*, a member of the ginger family, turmeric is perhaps the most celebrated spice in the scientific community for its health benefits. Curcumin, one of the three naturally occurring phytochemicals found in turmeric, is responsible for the spice's characteristic yellow color--and its health benefits.

Scientists have linked curcumin with protection against cognitive decline, cancer, and heart disease; improved lipid and glucose metabolism in individuals with type 2 diabetes, and reduced swelling in individuals with arthritis. India, a country which tends to use turmeric more frequently, has one of the lowest risk of colorectal cancer in the world, and a 4.4 times lower rate of Alzheimer's than American adults aged 70-79.

Turmeric adds a warm, earthy aroma and flavor to poultry, seafood and vegetables dishes, including curries and chutneys. While there's no clear dosage established for turmeric, experts suggest about 1,500 milligrams (2/3 teaspoon) of turmeric provides biologic activity in the body.

## Cinnamon

One of the oldest known spices, cinnamon (*Cinnamomum verum*) is available in over 100 varieties. It's derived from the brown bark of the cinnamon tree, and available in tubular form (a quill, or cinnamon stick) or ground powder. Studies have shown cinnamon provides antioxidant, anti-inflammatory and antimicrobial effects.

More recent research suggests it may also have blood glucose-lowering effects for people with diabetes. A 2009 study in the *Journal of the American Board of Family Medicine* found that adding 1 gram cinnamon (1/5 teaspoon) to one's daily diet, combined with usual care of medicine and doctor's follow-up, lowered hemoglobin A1C (HbA1C, a measurement of blood glucose control over time) by 0.83 percent, compared to usual care alone, which lowered HbA1C by 0.37 percent.

Cinnamon is commonly used in baked goods, breakfast cereals and beverages, but is also a delicious addition to baked beans and Middle Eastern recipes.

## Basil

Historically referred to as the "king of the herbs," basil (*Ocimum basilicum*) is popular in many global cuisines, including Italian and Thai. Basil leaves contain several health-promoting essential oils, including eugenol, which has shown anti-inflammatory properties similar to over-the-counter non-steroidal medications (i.e. ibuprofen).

Several studies also reveal basil's anti-bacterial properties, which limit the growth of *Saphylococcus*, *enterococcus*, *shigella* and *pseudomonas*--strains of bacteria that threaten food safety. Fresh or dried basil is a flavorful addition to tomato and pasta dishes, stir-fries, soups and salads.

## Pepper

This family of hot spices (*Capsicum* genus), including chili pepper, African chilies, paprika, and cayenne pepper, adds potent flavor to your cooking, as well as health benefits. Hot peppers are a concentrated source of capsaicin, which studies suggest has cancer-protective, anti-inflammatory, and pain-reducing effects. Preliminary research also indicates pepper may act as a blood thinner.

Add pepper to stir-fries, stews and egg dishes for an added kick of flavor and health rewards.

## Mint

Plants in the *Mentha* genus include 25 different species with varieties such as peppermint and spearmint. Several randomized controlled trials have found that peppermint may treat digestive disorders by relaxing the smooth muscles surrounding the intestines.

Peppermint contains rosmarinic acid, which exhibits several actions that are beneficial in the treatment of asthma, such as lowering inflammation. With its cooling flavor, mint is a refreshing addition to salads, smoothies and hot beverages.

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