

Tapping Into Turmeric's Superfood Powers

Fresh Turmeric.

Photo: Lisa Landers

At first glance turmeric looks a little like a decrepit carrot. But slice open its gnarled exterior and the sunburst of color you'll discover inside is your first clue that this is no ordinary root vegetable. In fact, it's not a root – it's a rhizome. And



the active compound responsible for its wondrous pigment – curcumin – is also what bestows turmeric with its anti-inflammatory and antioxidant super powers.

A fragrant but bitter flavored relative of ginger, turmeric is tropical plant native to southern India and Indonesia. Relied upon in traditional Chinese and Indian medicine for thousand of years for its health benefits, turmeric has long been known to be effective in treating and preventing certain ailments. But the evidence to back up this ancient wisdom was largely anecdotal, which has kept curcumin from becoming a staple part of Western medicine. But now, thanks to promising new studies, turmeric is on the brink of being embraced as more than just a spice used to give mustard its yellow color.

“We now know exactly how curcumin counteracts inflammation on a molecular level,” explains [Dr. Ajay Goel](#), Director of Epigenetics and Cancer Prevention at the Gastrointestinal Research Center at Baylor University. “In so many diseases like cancer, Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s, diabetes – inflammation is the common denominator. That’s why curcumin is being studied as a possible treatment for all of these things.”

Goel himself has been studying curcumin for almost two decades and has witnessed its effectiveness in treating diseases such as [rheumatoid arthritis](#). Hundreds of research efforts are underway around globe to assess curcumin’s potential as both a complimentary treatment and preventative regimen for dozens of conditions, such as reducing cholesterol, protecting against liver diseases, dissolving blood clots, improving cognition, preventing depression and treating digestive problems, just to name a few.

Although much of the research is very promising, there are a few things to bear in mind before you start sprinkling turmeric on your morning coffee.

Fresh and powdered turmeric. Photo: Lisa Landers



The results of many of these studies are based on concentrated doses of curcumin, which pack much more of a punch than you would get from just adding fresh or ground

turmeric to your recipes. Turmeric actually contains a very small amount curcumin; only about 3% by weight. So you would have to eat loads of turmeric – or take a curcumin supplement – to replicate the results of some of these studies.

For people in India and others for whom turmeric is a staple part of their diet, getting plenty of curcumin into their bodies is not a problem. It's speculated that lower rates of certain cancers and Alzheimer's among India's population may be linked to their copious intake of turmeric.

But what about for people like me who hardly ever eat turmeric except as part of an occasional bowl of curry? While the prospect of eating turmeric spiced meals three times a day is far fetched for many westerners, I was encouraged to learn that [even adding small amounts](#) curcumin to your diet on a daily basis can be effective in some cases.

“By all means, people should add curcumin to their diets if they can,” says Goel. “If you are really trying to treat some specific condition, just adding turmeric to your diet a few times a week may not be enough, but consuming any amount of curcumin will have some benefits.”

Ready to reap those benefits? You've got options. But whether you're thinking of adding some curcumin to your diet in supplement or food form (or a combination of the two), here are a few things to consider before you do.

Slow on the Uptake

Our bodies are bad at absorbing curcumin, which is another reason why high doses are administered in clinical trials. As a result, scientists are scrambling to figure out ways to make curcumin's magic more available to us.

A [1998 study](#) claimed that curcumin was absorbed 2000 times better if consumed along with some piperine; the active compound in black pepper. But some scientists are skeptical of this study, partly because its findings have never been replicated.

Over the last five years, however, more concrete evidence has emerged that certain curcumin extraction methods used to make supplements – including one called [BCM-95](#) – can significantly increase the amount that enters our bloodstreams.

In another piece of good news from the research front, there is one disease for which curcumin absorption is not a problem: colon cancer, the second leading cause of cancer-related deaths in the United States. “Whatever curcumin is not absorbed by the body just sits in the colon, so it has more of an effect there,” Goel explains. Besides inhibiting and even [obliterating](#) cancerous cells in the colon, [a 2014 study](#) suggests that curcumin is also effective at stopping it from spreading to other organs.

A few of the curcumin supplements available at Whole Foods. Photo: Lisa Landers

No Constraints on Curcumin Consumption, Mostly

According to Goel, there are virtually no side effects of consuming even

large amounts of curcumin on a daily basis, either in food, capsule or tincture form. This is one of the main benefits of curcumin over synthetic anti-inflammatory drugs like NSAIDS (non steroidal anti inflammatory, like ibuprofen), which all have toxic side effects if taken for extended periods of time.

So if you're thinking of taking curcumin supplements as part of a preventative regimen or to help treat a particular ailment, studies suggest that it's safe to take them over the long term. That said, if you take other pharmaceuticals regularly, it's best to ask your doctor because of [the risk of interactions](#) with substances that are in your system.

"It's the only supplement I take daily, says Goel, I don't even take a multivitamin." Goel takes a 250mg curcumin capsule daily as a preventative measure, but there are a number of [dosage charts](#) available online, some of which also include suggestions for how much fresh or dried turmeric to eat.

According to Goel, if you are solely using it in food form, there are no known concerns of eating it multiple times a day – other than flavor fatigue.

Preparing golden milk using fresh turmeric. Photo: Lisa Landers

Fresh, Powdered or Pre-packaged

Although no studies have been done comparing the efficacy of curcumin when used in its fresh form as opposed to the more widely available

powdered form, using fresh, whole foods are generally thought to be a more effective source of nutrients and other beneficial compounds.



Fresh turmeric will turn your fingers yellow, as I can attest after using it to make my [golden milk](#): a warm, eggnog-like concoction that I whipped up using coconut milk, turmeric, ginger, honey – and yes, a bit of black pepper.

If you don't want to turn your hands yellow, but prefer food to capsules, there are a variety of packaged products available from Bay Area brands, such as [Numi's Three Roots Turmeric Tea](#) (blended with ginger and licorice) and [Turmeric Tamari Almonds](#) from Navitas Naturals.

Another option is to stock your fridge with a few bottles of [Tumeric Alive](#) (sic), a line of blended turmeric drinks made with organic turmeric root harvested in Hawaii. The company's San Francisco-based founder, Daniel Silverman, says that many people drink these elixirs as a sports recovery drink because it reenergizes fatigued and inflamed muscles. For someone just looking to add a little more curcumin to their diet, he recommended drinking a single serving bottle three times a week to start.

While not as delicious as the warm mug of golden milk that I made for myself, Tumeric Alive's coconut elixir was lightly sweet, a bit spicy – and full of the promise of good health in which we all want to believe.

**Disclaimer: Please note that curcumin supplements are not FDA regulated, so there is no oversight in terms of quality control. Read more about potential risks on [The American Cancer Society](#) website.*

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