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The Herbs and Spices of Life

There's more to herbs and spices than taste and colour

Herbs and spices have been used in cooking throughout history. There's no doubt a pinch of this and a teaspoon of that can turn an average or bland dish into something a bit special. Also, to simulate those high-priced restaurant meals, a cheap sprig of garnish adds a touch of class. There is the bonus, however, that most of these pleasant yet seemingly inconsequential additives contain certain chemicals, minerals, acids and oils which are claimed to be beneficial for improving general health.

Those listed below are just a few that are quite common and most people use on a regular basis. Our short list was selected from a host that we researched; and the properties of each have been trimmed back to the basics that seem likely to be true. Google any one and you'll be amazed by the medical conditions the powders and leaves are purported to prevent or cure - everything from water on the knee to Bubonic Plague; but, being a skeptic, I take many of these claims, like my food, with a pinch of salt.

Cardamom is an ingredient in many curries and Asian dishes. Containing a number of vitamins including niacin, thiamine and vitamins A and C, plus a few minerals, it is said to be good for digestive problems like heartburn and irritable bowel syndrome. Certain dental diseases can supposedly be cured, along with some urinary tract infections. Anyone seeking an aphrodisiac need look no further – just don't expect it to work!

Cinnamon buns and pancakes are great. Even smelling this spice is said to improve brain function, and researchers have successfully used the extract to prevent cells from swelling following a stroke. There is no doubt in our minds that it helps with digestion. Since adding it to the grounds in our coffee machine, we're spending a lot less on antacids.

Cloves tend to be used sparingly as the taste is pretty strong – anyone who has bitten into a whole one from an apple pie or a curry will know what I mean. That part of the mouth it touches tends to go numb for a while; hence oil of cloves provides a natural temporary relief from toothache. There are many other claims, but for my money the most likely of the rest is for masking bad breath.

Coriander comes fresh, or dried and ground, and has many culinary uses in curries and stews. As well as a garnish, fresh leaves add a touch of colour and light flavour to rice dishes and sauces. It is claimed to reduce cholesterol and regulate blood pressure; and its high iron content may help with anemia. Said to have strong anti-histamine properties, it supposedly helps relieve hay fever.

Cumin, a companion of chilli in many dishes, contains thymol, a compound known to stimulate the digestive system, and reduce gas build-up in the intestines. The seeds of cumin apparently act as an expectorant and help to clear mucus from the lungs and airways. There is also a claim that it moisturises the skin and, as such, is a natural anti-ageing nutrient. One can only hope.

Garam Masala is a spice I use frequently in sauces and stir-fries. Actually, it is a blend of 10 or more different spices, and would presumably retain some of the benefits of each. Practitioners of Ayurvedic (Indian) medicine say it increases body temperature and raises metabolism, improving digestion and preventing the build-up of toxins. It may even help reduce constipation.

Mint is well-known for flavouring in candy. A study in 2007 suggested peppermint water can prevent nipple cracks and pain that first-time breast-feeding mothers experience. Containing menthol, mint can relieve sore throats and, as an ingredient of cough syrups, breaks up phlegm and mucus associated with colds and chest infections.

Nutmeg was thought by the ancient Romans and Greeks to be a brain tonic. Chinese medicos in the dim dark ages used its properties as a natural sedative to treat inflammation, arthritis and stomach pain, but I understand this was prepared as an oil to be applied externally. When ingested, nutmeg is claimed to alleviate both constipation and diarrhea – I guess that covers all those bases! Used in the treatment of gum problems, it is an ingredient in many brands of toothpaste. I can't personally endorse any of these; but I love the flavour in sweet dishes, and often sprinkle it along with powdered coriander on steak prior to frying.

Oregano is loaded with fibre and can help promote digestion. It is also a natural form of omega-3 fatty acids which is a good type of cholesterol – well, that's what I'm told – and it detoxifies the body. An essential in Italian dishes, pretty much all of the plant can be eaten, either fresh or dried; and the flowers are especially aromatic.

Paprika, a particular type of dried, ground capsicum, contains, would you believe, beta-cryptoxanthin, lutein and zeaxanthin, plus other tongue-twisters that are good for arthritis, eye health, diabetes, and boosting the immune system. Wow! I just reckon it's great for stews, curries and chicken paprika which, with these other pluses, makes for a pretty healthy meal.

Parsley is a herb everyone knows. My Mum always claimed there was as much nutrition in a sprig of parsley as there was in a steak. I seriously doubt that, but it does seem to contain many vitamins and minerals that are necessary for good health, so why not eat it? Fresh is best – dried just tastes like tea leaves!

Rosemary as a plant is so easy to grow, even in a tub. It is supposed to boost memory, improve mood, stimulate circulation, aid digestion and increase production of red blood cells. It contains carnosol and carnosic acid which, it has been said, are linked to the reduction of inflammation in muscles and joints. **A word of warning, though: don't swallow the oil, and only eat moderate quantities of the fresh or dried plant. And, if you are allergic to mint, this is from the same family.**

I could go on, but I think that's enough herbs and spices for one day. They certainly seem to be beneficial for general health; and, as far as food goes, a little bit of something extra makes for a tastier meal, don't you think?

Keep an eye out for the follow-up article on the health benefits of fruits, roots and vegetables.

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