



The Be Fit Minute

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SPICE UP YOUR DIET

Spices are made from the seed, root, and bark of various plants. They have been used to enhance the flavor of food, but they may also help keep you healthy. While spice-based studies need more research to prove definitive benefits, cooking with spices may fortify both your body and your meal with a mere dash of effort. (Taking supplements may not be as beneficial as regularly consuming natural plant-based sources.)

Spices contain phytochemicals (plant chemicals) touted to help prevent and treat many health conditions. There are currently over 2,000 phytochemicals in herbs and spices, so get out your spice rack and start experimenting. If you are spice-shy, a dash (~1/8 of a teaspoon) is a good place to start.

SPICE PERKS:

- **Anti-inflammatory:** Cumin and ginger have anti-inflammatory compounds. (Inflammation is involved in many chronic diseases.)
- **Fighting Germs:** Oregano, cumin, and cinnamon have been found to have natural antibacterial properties.
- **Anticancer:** Spices, like rosemary, have been found to decrease the effect of cancer-causing compounds in food (like the compounds that can form in meat when you grill it).
- **Weight Regulation:** Chilies, like cayenne pepper, may slightly boost metabolism and enhance satiety after meals.
- **Intestinal Health:** Cumin has been shown to aid in digestion. Ginger may help protect your intestines from damage and may also help relieve an “upset stomach.”
- **Pain Management:** Ginger may help reduce joint and muscle pain after exercise.
- **Brain Function:** Ginger may also help increase your attention and enhance your memory.
- **Nutritional Merit:** 1 tsp dried thyme has ~10% of your daily value of iron (dried cloves have 4%). 1 tsp dried basil has 30% daily value vitamin K (dried oregano has 14%). 1 tsp cayenne pepper has 15% of your daily value of vitamin A.



SPICE POWER:

Spices are a good source of protective chemicals called antioxidants. The following foods have similar antioxidant potencies:

- 1 tsp of cinnamon = ½ cup blueberries
- ½ tsp dried oregano = 3 cups fresh spinach
- ½ tsp cayenne = ½ cup watermelon

Natural Spice Food Pairings

CITRUS

Ginger likes citrus flavors. Ginger pairs particularly well with lemon and oregano. Add minced or dried ginger to a fruit smoothie or fruit salad for some subtle heat.

COFFEE

The flavors of cinnamon and coffee play well together: add cinnamon to your ground coffee beans prior to brewing.

CHOCOLATE

Surprisingly, chilies are a wonderful partner to chocolate. Try adding a pinch of cayenne to chocolate pudding, cake, or brownies. Ancho chilies have natural chocolate undertones and may pair well with savory recipes that call for cocoa, like chili and mole sauce.

LAMB

Rosemary is a classic seasoning for lamb with its herbal undertones. (Rosemary can help cut through most richly flavored game meats, like lamb, venison, or duck.) Cinnamon and cumin can also enhance lamb-based dishes.

FISH

Many varieties of fish are delicate and need to be seasoned accordingly. Ginger and citrus tend to work with the flavor of fish, enhancing rather than competing with it. Try seasoning white fish, such as cod, with lemon or orange juice and minced ginger.

TOMATO

Next time you make tomato soup, add a pinch of cumin and cinnamon to deepen its flavor. Chili flakes are also “flavor lifters” and can brighten tomato-based dishes.

NUTS

Toast almonds with rosemary. Or add a kick to mixed nuts with chili spices: try pairing cayenne with cinnamon and brown sugar. Cumin also pairs well with such flavors. Paprika would be another welcomed addition with its naturally sweet notes.

Hungry for more? Check out Chef Ana Sortun's book, *Spice: Flavors of the Eastern Mediterranean* for recipes.