

SPICE THINGS UP

To get the most out of our food we want it to tantalise our tastebuds. We need to use every trick at our disposal to make our food appeal to us so that we stay on track! Herbs and cooking spices are a great way to do this. Packed full of vitamins, minerals and antioxidants, they are also a healthy way to do it. Every time you add a herb or a spice to your meal, think of it as an easy way to upgrade your meal and add in easy nutrient value.

Let's take a look at the properties of some popular and easily accessible herbs that you can start adding to your meals.

The spice, **turmeric**, has really become the evidence-based medicine hero of calming inflammation. As lots of health conditions have an underlying foundation of inflammation, this is good news for us. The active ingredient of turmeric is curcumin and there are numerous studies around it. In some instances, these show that curcumin can rival the anti-inflammatory properties of medicinal drugs. Turmeric has also been shown to protect the liver against toxic damage and even regenerate damaged liver cells. It is a mildly aromatic spice, with scents of orange and ginger and it has a bitter taste. Its vibrant yellow colour is used to dye food, so remember it will stain your clothes and your skin and you should use it carefully. Add turmeric to your stir fries, soups, slow cooked meals and veggie juices.

A popular spice commonly found in baked goods and puddings, **cinnamon** has lots of beneficial properties. Where it stands out though is its potential effects on lowering blood sugar levels. This woody spice is made from bark and manages a sweet and savoury taste at the same time. Sprinkle it on your porridge, add to your smoothies and use it in making some healthy treats.

Cayenne is a hot pepper that is dried and ground. It can be good for stimulating your circulatory system and getting your blood flowing and so may also help in keeping your blood pressure low. Due to its stimulation of your circulation it has also been credited with balancing your blood sugar levels and helping your digestive system move bacteria and toxins out of the body. You can see why adding it into a detox may prove useful. It might not be for everyone, but adding a dash of cayenne to your morning hot water and lemon might be helpful. Start with just a pinch and work your way up if you feel it agrees with you.

Fresh **ginger** has a strong aroma and sharp, spicy flavour. It is a very warming spice, especially when cooked slowly, and ground ginger is often a feature of baked goods. Ginger has many chemical compounds and the oily resin gingerol from the root is credited with anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties. Ginger has been used for thousands of years in Chinese and Indian tonics and Ayurvedic medicine has long praised its ability to support your immune system. Its anti-inflammatory effects may help those who are bloated or constipated and sipping ginger tea can be a good way to relieve nausea. These are some of the reasons we suggest using it along with lemon in a morning brew during your detox – and beyond!

With its piney flavour **rosemary** conjures up images of Italian cooking and pairs well with both meat and vegetable dishes. The compounds within rosemary provide anti-inflammatory, anti-fungal, anti-bacterial and antiseptic properties. Rosemary may provide a list of health benefits including: its ability to boost memory, improve mood, reduce inflammation, relieve pain, protect the immune system, balance hormones stimulate circulation, heal skin, thicken hair and detoxify the body. You can use it to spike meat, poultry and game when cooking or use it in sauces and stuffing. It is also a wonderful essential oil to use in aromatherapy massage blends.

Closely related to onions, shallots and leeks, **garlic** contains a compound called allicin which has potent medicinal properties. Garlic is a wonderful addition to liven up our dishes, but it has other benefits too. Containing vitamins C and B6, selenium and antioxidants research suggests the long-held views on health associated with garlic are true. It is recognised for improving circulation, lowering cholesterol and blood pressure and protecting against the common cold. Garlic has a very strong, pungent and heated taste. As it gets older it gets sharper and spicier in flavour. Adding garlic to just about any dish will liven it: soups, hummus, guacamole, slow cooked dinners, dressings and sauces. If you are worried about garlic breath, chewing some fresh parsley after a meal will counteract.

On a per gram basis, herbs and spices rank even higher in antioxidant content than vegetables. In case you needed another reason to include them in your culinary creations! And don't forget teas - they are often an easy and flavoursome way to consume these health boosting herbs and spices.