

Ask the Dietitian February 2015

What healthful properties do the herbs and spices in my spice rack have, and in particular Turmeric?

Answer: Herbs and spices have been around for thousands of years, used for their purported medicinal properties, unique flavors and for barter and currency. Today, Turmeric a shrub similar to ginger, is causing a lot of scientific interest because of its curcumin content and its possible anti-inflammatory, antioxidant and anticancer properties. It apparently kills cancer cells in test tubes and reduces tumors in animals. Human studies of curcumin are in the early stages, but it has been shown to be very poorly absorbed from the intestine. High intakes of 3.6 grams a day in pill form, are needed before it can be detected at blood level (that's a lot of pills!). However, many people claim that adding turmeric to their food, has helped lessen digestive disorders such as irritable bowel syndrome and colitis. Maybe because curcumin is poorly absorbed and spends more time on the lining of the intestine, its potential anti-inflammatory properties are able to exert some benefit? Of note, people who are taking blood thinning medication, or are at risk for kidney stones, gallstones, have stomach ulcers or are pregnant, should avoid ingesting large amounts of turmeric. If you are taking turmeric in dietary supplement form, discuss with your physician or pharmacist any possible medication interaction.

There are studies all over the world investigating various spices, herbs, extracts etc., all hoping to find a magic ingredient and way of using it, and wouldn't it be wonderful if that happened. In the meantime, and from a different perspective, we know that fresh herbs typically contain good amounts of vitamin C, beta-carotene and often vitamin K, and we understand the benefit of how these vitamins function in the human body. Dried herbs and spices will have minimal vitamin C, unless added in after processing. Although many herbs and spices show *promise* in animal studies against various disease states, whether the effect will translate into the human body remains to be seen, and more clinical trials are needed before we can safely promote the use of herbs and spices to actually treat disease.

The National Center for Complimentary and Alternative Medicine has a website that documents current research and generally where we are at, in terms of reliable evidence to support the use of herbs and spices to treat health conditions. Found at www.nccam.nih.gov.

Bottom line; herbs and spices may possibly contain substances that have health promoting properties. Whether we can eat them in therapeutic amounts is unclear. For now, enjoy the delicious flavors and colors that herbs and spices add to your meals. Hopefully when using them, you will find it possible to reduce the amount of salt, sugar and fat you use in cooking, and that we know, is good for all of us!

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Part two of “I am tired, what should I eat to give me more energy?”

Answer: Last month we talked about the role water can play in fatigue, so now let's examine the food aspect. Firstly, there is no miracle energy food. Glucose, or carbohydrate, is the body's ideal energy source, the fuel that our cells prefer. Protein and fat slow down the digestion and absorption of carbohydrate into the blood stream, allowing a slow constant flow into our body. Eating regular meals that balance protein, fat and carbohydrate provides a steady source of energy. Choose lean protein, either animal or vegetable, heart healthy fats and complex carbohydrates (whole grains, fruits and vegetables). When you are tired try and avoid eating foods that contain a large amount of sugar, like candy bars. These will raise your blood sugar quickly, giving you a fast burst of energy, only to have you fall to earth pretty quickly thereafter, and probably feeling even worse. Likewise with soda, the sugar and caffeine will give you an immediate boost, usually followed by a crash, or the need to drink more soda.

I am sure you are all doing this, but, don't forget to include at *least* five servings of fruits and vegetables a day with your meals. Produce contains an abundance of vitamins and minerals that help to regulate energy metabolism at the cellular level, a bit like a spark plug.

Lastly, but probably more relevant, is exercise, (and stepping out of my scope of practice) exercise begets energy. If not doing so already, start exercising, at the very least walking and remember to always check with your doctor before starting an exercise plan.

Bottom line; regular balanced meals, 5-a-Day, a tall glass of water and a good walk, I am feeling energized already!

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