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Spices can be a great way to improve the taste of food and increase food's health benefits. Flavors provided by spices can decrease the use of salt and fat in dishes without compromising taste. Spices can also be a rich source of nutrients and trace minerals that we may be missing in other areas of our diet. Many spices are thought to have properties that can improve health and function in a wide variety of ways. While all of these effects may not have been proven in rigorously conducted scientific studies, they do have the wisdom of hundreds (if not thousands) of years of traditional use. The food we eat and the spices we add really can be some of our best medicine. With some basic knowledge you can start utilizing the benefits of a little added spice today. Let's get started.

What are spices?
Spices and herbs are terms that are often used interchangeably. Herbs commonly refer to the leaves of plants. Spices usually come from other parts of plants or trees (e.g. roots, stems and seeds) that can be harvested and often dried for use in cooking, teas and traditional medicines. Examples of common herbs include: oregano, parsley, rosemary and thyme. Some commonly used spices are: ginger, cinnamon and cayenne. They can be dried and then bottled. This is the form that many of us are familiar with from our spice cabinet. However, some spices can also be purchased (or in some cases grown) and used fresh. When used fresh, they often have more powerful flavor and may be more likely to retain more of their health promoting properties.

Ginger. Ginger is a root used in food preparation throughout the world and available in powdered form and fresh in most grocery stores. Ginger has a strong spicy flavor that is even more powerful when used in its fresh form. It has documented benefits in aiding in digestion and is often used as a tea to help control nausea. It has a warming quality that makes it a very good addition to winter soups, stews and vegetable dishes. Ways to use ginger: some fresh root chopped up and boiled in water makes a great tea (and helps digestion), pieces of fresh minced root added to stewed meat recipes, carrots, mashed sweet potatoes or squash dishes.

Garlic. Garlic is the strongly flavored bulb of a plant that is closely related to the onion. Garlic has traditionally been used to help fight off infections and to increase circulation. Modern health claims have suggested that garlic may lower cholesterol, prevent infections like the common cold and help lower blood sugar. Research in these areas has not been able to clearly prove

these claims. Nonetheless, garlic when added to dishes provides a strong flavor, and can be especially helpful in aiding in the digestion of hearty meat dishes. Ways to use garlic: fresh garlic chopped or minced and added liberally to meat dishes and sautéed vegetables and mashed potatoes. When cooking, sauté the garlic and onions first to soften their flavor before adding other foods.

Cayenne. Cayenne is a powder and is made from dried chili peppers. Just a little can provide quite a bit of heat. Skin creams made of capsaicin (one of the chemical ingredients in cayenne peppers that provide the heat) have been used for years to treat joint pain. Cayenne increases blood flow (think about the rising sensation of heat you get when eating spicy food). There is substantial evidence that this increase in blood flow to the stomach caused by eating spicy foods may actually protect against stomach ulcers. In addition, cayenne can be a great treatment for nasal congestion (think how much your nose runs when eating spicy food). It is a very rich source of Vitamin A and Vitamin C and antioxidants that if used consistently may play a role in supporting immune health. Ways to use cayenne: in hot lemon tea with a small bit of cayenne to clear nasal congestion, added to eggs or beans or anywhere else you need a bit of spice.

Turmeric. Turmeric is a brightly colored orange powder that is made from the dried root of a plant that is related to ginger. It is commonly used in South Asian and Middle Eastern cooking. Even if these cuisines are not to your taste, most of us will have encountered turmeric as the yellow/orange spice that gives mustard its bright color. Turmeric and one of its chemical components curcurmin has been associated with a long line of potential health benefits. Studies have demonstrated that curcurmin may improve inflammatory conditions as varied as arthritis, psoriasis, and inflammatory bowel disease. Populations of people that eat a lot of turmeric also have very low rates of Alzheimer's disease and scientists think that turmeric may play a role in this. It is reasonable to think that adding turmeric liberally to foods may support health by decreasing inflammation. Turmeric is widely available in grocery stores. Uses for turmeric: add to chicken and rice dishes to give a beautiful yellow color (adding some cinnamon or curry powder can balance out the flavor). Turmeric tea can also be a way to get a concentrated dose of turmeric. (See my website for recipe.)

A few notes about using spices.
As with most food products, quality and freshness matters. Spices often sit on supermarket shelves and in our spice cabinets for years before being used. Over time, they can lose their flavor and their potent health effects. The ideal shelf life for whole herbs (e.g. peppercorns, cinnamon sticks) is usually 2 years. For ground spices the ideal shelf life is 6 months. So use some spice and use it often. I hope you found this information helpful and I would love to hear from you. What ways have you tried using spices to add flavor to food and enhance your health?

Dr. Winbush is a family physician practicing at NorthPoint Health and Wellness Center. She has a strong interest in wellness and patient education to help individuals feel empowered to optimize their health and functioning. She wants to hear from you! To respond to this article, request topics for future articles and for additional resources visit www.functionwellmedicine.com or LIKE Function Well

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