

Add some spice to your food and boost your disease-prevention power

January 6 2012, By Drs. Kay Judge and Maxine Barish-Wreden

The holidays are over, January has arrived, and many of us enter the New Year determined to live our lives a little healthier than last.

If you're a [baby boomer](#), you may be noticing a few more aches and pains this year compared to last, or perhaps a little progression of some unwelcome medical problem like [high blood pressure](#) or diabetes.

We often hear about the health benefits of eating more fruits and veggies, getting a little more exercise, or getting your weight down, but did you know that adding more [spices](#) and herbs to your food can reduce inflammation and also reduce your risk of chronic disease?

Most cultures have used spices and herbs in their traditional cuisines for thousands of years; we often think of these ingredients as flavor-enhancers, but nature in her wisdom has also provided these plants to us for their powerful health benefits.

In the past 50 years, we have come to understand that cancer and other [chronic illnesses](#) may be due to damage or [dysregulation](#) of some of our genes. It has only been in the past decade, however, that scientists have discovered that many nutrients in foods, including spices, can prevent these [genetic changes](#) and reduce our risk for some of these diseases.

Dr. Bharat Aggarwal, an [oncologist](#) at the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Texas is one of the leading researchers in the world looking at the [health impact](#) of spices and herbs. In many recent scientific publications

and studies, he and his colleagues have uncovered the health benefits of these food ingredients and shown how they may prevent and even help treat a wide array of [chronic diseases](#) including cancer.

One of the powerful ways that spices and herbs exert their protective effect in the body is by inactivating a protein complex in cells that's known as NF kappa B.

NF Kappa B acts like a master control switch for inflammation and cell growth. When it's activated, it turns on hundreds of genes that are involved in abnormal cell growth and inflammation; this can allow a cancer cell to continue growing or it can promote ongoing inflammatory responses in the body that can fuel chronic disease.

Blocking NF kappa B can reduce cancer [cell growth](#), or even allow cancer cells to respond better to chemotherapy drugs. Blocking this protein can also reduce the inflammation that leads to a number of chronic diseases including coronary artery disease, Alzheimer's disease, osteoporosis, arthritis, and autoimmune diseases like multiple sclerosis.

Populations that consume lots of these spices seem to have less chronic disease than we do in the United States. For example, in India turmeric is frequently consumed in curries. Turmeric contains the phytochemical curcumin, and curcumin is a particularly powerful inhibitor of NF Kappa B.

In India, Alzheimer's disease is far less common than it is in the U.S., and scientists suspect that it is the frequent consumption of turmeric that has resulted in this difference.

You don't have to look far to find these beneficial spices - you probably have many of them already in your kitchen spice rack. In addition to turmeric, they include mint, rosemary, garlic, basil, ginger, fenugreek,

cumin, cloves, coriander, cinnamon, black pepper, and red chili pepper.

Scientists are still trying to determine which of these spices would be useful if taken by capsule to prevent or treat disease, and the data is very intriguing and encouraging.

Before you run out to buy these in pill form, though, we encourage you to include and enjoy these spices in your foods on a daily basis: add some cinnamon to your breakfast cereal, enjoy some mint-ginger tea with your lunch and top your dinner pasta with a little garlic and rosemary. If you're really adventuresome, you might want to try making your own curry at home - a great time to experiment with fresh or dried turmeric. You'll give your taste buds a zing, and you'll be doing your part to keep your genes happy and healthy too.

Bon appetit!

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