

Spices and herbs: Improving public health through flavorful eating—a call to action

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Spices and herbs can play a significant role in improving America's health by helping to reduce sodium, calorie and fat intake while making healthy eating more appealing, conclude the authors of a scientific supplement published this month in the peer-reviewed journal *Nutrition Today*.

The publication, entitled [Spices and Herbs: Improving Public Health Through Flavorful Eating](#), is based on the conference proceedings of a Science Summit convened by the McCormick Science Institute in partnership with the American Society for Nutrition in Washington, D.C., on May 20-21, 2014. The goal of the summit was to bring together academia, health professionals, chefs, government, and the food industry to examine the state of the science on spices and herbs, and to cultivate a dialogue on how flavorful eating can offer potential solutions to improve America's health.

The special edition journal features 16 papers by leading experts that explore the latest research on spices and herbs, including studies that point to the positive impact of spices and herbs on diet quality, as well as other studies that suggest certain spices and herbs may have beneficial effects on satiety, energy metabolism, inflammation, insulin resistance and cardiovascular risk factors.

Until now, little attention has been given to the link between flavor and [public health](#). However, the McCormick Science Institute Summit and these proceedings are helping to create awareness of this important

connection.

"We now understand that spices and herbs have a meaningful role to play in bringing flavor to the forefront of today's health and wellness conversations," said Johanna Dwyer, DSc, RD, professor of medicine and community health at Tufts University School of Medicine, who spoke at the Science Summit and serves as editor of *Nutrition Today*. "It will take all of us working together – from scientists to chefs and product developers to policy makers – before we can really begin to improve public health through flavorful eating."

How Spices and Herbs Potentially Improve Health

- Increase acceptance of healthy foods: James O. Hill, PhD from the University of Colorado and the Anschutz Health and Wellness Center, presented data demonstrating that adding spices and herbs to reduced-fat meals (lean meats, vegetables and pasta) helped make them more appealing. In fact, some reduced fat dishes with added herbs and spices were rated just as high as the full-fat version. Dr. Hill concluded that adding spices and herbs to reduced-fat meals may make them more acceptable to people who struggle with long-term dietary changes to reduce fat.
- Adhere to lower-sodium eating plans: Spices and herbs have the potential to help the public meet dietary guidelines for sodium without sacrificing taste. A research study conducted at Johns Hopkins found that an intervention addressing behaviors, including adding spices and herbs to food, resulted in lower sodium intake when compared to those who did not have behavioral intervention. Those participants using spices and herbs consumed an average of 966 mg/day of sodium less than the group that didn't receive the intervention.
- Enhance energy metabolism and satiety: Margriet Westerterp-Plantenga, PhD from Maastricht University reviewed research

showing that culinary amounts of red pepper increased energy expenditure and satiety in healthy adults. She concluded that red pepper may assist individuals who are trying to manage their weight.

- Reduce [cardiovascular risk factors](#): Sheila West, PhD from The Pennsylvania State University provided an overview of research that found a spice blend added to a high-fat meal decreased post-meal insulin and triglyceride levels compared to the same meal without added spices. David Heber, MD, PhD from UCLA shared his research showing that a spice mixture added to hamburger meat helps protect fat from oxidation.
- Improve insulin sensitivity: Richard Anderson, PhD from the Beltsville Human Nutrition Research Center presented an overview of the evidence on cinnamon, which indicates that the spice may help improve blood glucose levels and insulin sensitivity.

Translating the Science into Action

After the formal presentations at the Science Summit, participants formed task force groups to identify specific action steps to elevate the dialogue around spices and herbs. The outcomes were summarized in the *Nutrition Today* journal by Guy H. Johnson, PhD executive director of the McCormick Science Institute.

- Consumer Education: Develop and use actionable messages to help consumers understand the science that supports the role spices and herbs may play in promoting health. The messages need to be science-based and tailored to specific audiences, including children and youth in schools. Areas to explore include guidance on cooking healthy foods with spices and herbs and using authorities like registered dietitians, chefs, food scientists and celebrities to help educate the public.

- **Product Development:** Support the development of healthy foods with quality research studies, including behavioral studies and data on the functionality of added spices and herbs, along with their thresholds for health and palatability. Create public-private partnerships that foster collaboration on research.
- **Public Policy:** Consider including science-based messages about spices and herbs in the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and other government nutrition education materials. Reinforce the benefits of spices and herbs in initiatives focused on weight management, sodium and saturated fat reduction and building [healthy eating](#) patterns.

The McCormick Science Institute, a research organization dedicated to advancing the [science](#) of spices and herbs, is building on the learnings from the Science Summit to help guide future research. The priority funding areas include exploring how flavor can help improve the acceptability of healthier foods and how adding [spices](#) and herbs can increase vegetable consumption among adults and school-age children.

The *Nutrition Today* journal supplement is the outcome of a May 2014 conference organized by the McCormick Science Institute in partnership with the American Society for Nutrition: [McCormick Science Institute Science Summit—Spices and Herbs: Improving Public Health Through Flavorful Eating—A Call to Action](#). The full collection of papers is available on the *Nutrition Today* [website](#).

More information: Spices and Herbs: Improving Public Health Through Flavorful Eating. *Nutrition Today*. September/October 2014. Volume 29, Supplement 5, Pages S1-S26.

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