

# Hot stuff: Spicy foods can't harm you, can they?

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Spicy food challenges are all the rage these days, but can munching red

hot peppers and sizzling hot sauces harm you?

One nutrition expert from University Hospitals Cleveland Medical Center in Ohio suggests that while it may burn your tongue at the [dinner table](#) and trigger some gastrointestinal distress as it travels through your body, it could actually help improve your lifelong health.

[Capsaicin](#), the ingredient found in peppers that causes that characteristic heat, is an oil-like chemical compound that binds to pain receptors on the tongue and throughout the digestive tract. It's the capsaicin that causes your brains to feel like you're on fire when you bite into a jalapeno pepper.

"But [capsaicin](#) does not actually burn you," explained Jayna Metalonis, a dietician at University Hospitals. "Instead, it tricks your brain into thinking a [temperature change](#) has occurred, resulting in the sensation of heat and pain."

It's just your body's attempt to cool down and purge the more memorable spice-induced symptoms, like runny noses, sweating, teary eyes and even drooling. The study found that while consuming hot food, body temperature does actually rise in an effort to cool the body down—so that head-floating, skin-on-fire sensation isn't all in your head.

Capsaicin typically unbinds from pain receptors in the mouth after about 20 minutes, but then a whole new slew of symptoms begin once it starts traveling through the digestive system. As the irritant passes through, it can cause burning sensations in the chest, hiccups, swelling of the throat, nausea, vomiting, painful bowel movements and even diarrhea.

But the short-term struggle may be worth it for the long-term payoff, the investigators suggested.

According to Metalonis, research has shown that those who ate [spicy food](#) six times a week had a reduced risk of premature death when compared to people who ate spicy [food](#) less than once a week. The benefits included lower cholesterol, a decreased chance of heart disease, better stomach and gut health, and even weight loss. But while these studies found an association, they did not prove a cause-and-effect relationship.

Capsaicin is also the key ingredient in a number of [pain relief medications](#) used to treat ailments from arthritis to fibromyalgia to headaches.

"The good news is that for most healthy people—even those participating in 'extreme' challenges involving consumption of record-setting [hot peppers](#)—eating very spicy foods does not pose any serious or lasting dangers to your health and does not usually require [medical treatment](#)," Metalonis said in a hospital news release.

But she noted that there are exceptions.

The "[one chip challenge](#)," a viral social media challenge on TikTok involving eating one extremely hot chip loaded with Carolina Reaper spice, has on some occasions put people into the ER with "thunderclap headache," and spontaneous ruptures in the throat are rare, but have happened. So, while [chili peppers](#) may make your dinner a bit more exciting, it's still best not to consume too much of a good thing, Metalonis said.

**More information:** Visit the U.S. National Library of Medicine for more on how [capsaicin](#) is being used as a topical treatment for certain conditions.



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