

It's the flavor of the season, but be wary of peppermint platitudes

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Peppermint, like Santa Claus, seems to be everywhere you turn at the holidays. And also like Santa, when it comes to evaluating claims about it, the most scientific minds will tell you they need more evidence.

An [internet search](#) will turn up all kinds of statements about [peppermint](#)'s powers, said Anandh Babu Pon Velayutham, an associate professor of nutrition and integrative physiology at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, "but it is not a magic plant."

The plant itself is a cross between water mint and spearmint. Fresh leaves can be used to add flavor to food. Dried, it can be used in tea. Oil can be extracted from the plant's stem, leaves and flowers. Much of that oil, Velayutham said, is menthol and the chemically related menthone, which is what gives peppermint its bracing fragrance.

Mint has had true believers for thousands of years. Roman scholar Pliny the Elder wrote that "the very smell of mint reanimates the spirits, and its flavor gives a remarkable zest to food." Among dozens of other uses, he suggested mint was "good for the voice when a person is about to engage in a contest of eloquence, but only when taken just before."

But modern authorities have been cool to the topic. The National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health says "very little" research has been done on peppermint leaf, and only a small amount of research has been conducted on peppermint oil, mostly focused on irritable bowel syndrome, or IBS.

After one extensive review, Velayutham said, researchers did suggest that peppermint oil could help improve IBS symptoms. But that analysis, published in 2018 in the *American Journal of Gastroenterology*, involved only seven [clinical trials](#) with a total of 634 people, and the researchers said the evidence to support peppermint oil's use was "modest." (The review noted that peppermint oil comes in many forms. For IBS, it's

usually given in capsules that deliver the oil to the intestines.)

Similarly, Velayutham said, peppermint oil and menthol are promoted as cold remedies. But while menthol can create the sensation of airflow, it has not actually been shown to work as a decongestant.

Some research has hinted that peppermint might improve memory and alertness, but that's not conclusive, Velayutham said. And although it's become synonymous with the idea of fresh breath, he said such effects are temporary.

The Food and Drug Administration says peppermint is "generally recognized as safe." Velayutham said that with the levels most people would encounter in their diet, "it won't cause any issues. But with the [higher doses](#), definitely, it's better to check with the doctor."

This time of year, peppermint may be most likely to pop up in a candy cane. To be clear, that's not a remedy for anything but a sugar craving. Ingredients vary by brand, but according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, one common half-ounce candy cane was made of [corn syrup](#), sugar, [peppermint oil](#) and food coloring. Its 9 grams of added sugar would be 18% of the recommended daily value.

Each cane also comes with 50 calories. You'd have to dance the Peppermint Twist about six or seven minutes to burn that off. Speaking of holiday favorites, a 16-ounce peppermint mocha has 440 calories, which is a whole lot of additional twisting.

But for all that, there is no reason to pooh-pooh peppermint plants. Peppermint contains "a fair amount of nutrients," Velayutham said. According to the USDA, 2 tablespoons of fresh peppermint have just 2 calories and provide 6.8 micrograms of vitamin A, or less than 1% of the recommended daily amount for an adult. It also has 0.16 milligrams of

iron, which is about 2% of the recommended amount for men, and almost 1% for women.

Herbs such as peppermint can be used as a healthy alternative to salt for perking up the flavor of many foods. It's a common ingredient in many Indian dishes, Velayutham said. It's also easy to grow and can be plucked fresh from your garden whenever you need it.

People who have [gastroesophageal reflux disease](#), or GERD, might want to be careful, though, because peppermint can relax the sphincter between the esophagus and stomach, which can lead to heartburn.

Overall, Velayutham said, peppermint might not be magic, but it is safe for most people.

But perhaps as with Santa—it's best not to ask it to deliver too much.

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