

# Gingerbread is an ancient staple of the holiday season—and its spices may have some surprising health benefits

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No confectionery symbolizes the holidays quite like gingerbread. While most of us associate gingerbread with edible houses and spiced loaves of

cake-like bread, it's also increasingly appearing as flavoring in novelty drinks and Christmas cocktails.

Gingerbread may be considered an indulgent treat if you're only considering the calorie content. But it's Christmas, and indulging in a treat or two can be a fun and healthy part of life—especially when this classic biscuit includes many nutrients that may benefit your health.

Gingerbread is [believed to have originated](#) in its earliest form in [2400BC ancient Greece](#). Surprisingly, this recipe didn't contain any [ginger](#) at all—and was actually a [honey cake](#).

But the version of [gingerbread](#) we know and love today didn't start to take shape until the 11th century when Crusaders returned from their travels in the Middle East with ginger in hand. Ginger was [first cultivated](#) in ancient China, where it was commonly used as a medical treatment.

This led to the cooks of nobility in Europe to begin [experimenting with ginger](#) in their cooking. As [ginger and other spices](#) became more affordable to the masses in the mid-1600s, gingerbread caught on.

The [original term](#) "gingerbread" referred to preserved ginger, which was developed into a confection made with honey and spices. Later, the term was used to refer to the French confectionery pain d'epices (spice bread) and the German Lebkuchen or Pfefferkuchen (pepperbread or pepper cake).

But the gingerbread house, which is now a staple of modern Christmas traditions, is believed to have been invented in [18th-century](#) Germany, thanks to the fairy tale Hansel and Gretel by the Brothers Grimm. The practice then spread to England at some point during the 19th century.

[Queen Elizabeth I](#) is credited with creating the first gingerbread men. She would delight visiting dignitaries with gingerbread figures baked into their likeness.

Despite its ancient origins, baking gingerbread during the holiday season remains a celebrated tradition in many parts of the world.

For example, in Sweden, designing and building gingerbread houses is [traditional](#) during the Christmas season and symbolizes holiday spirits, family bonding and Swedish heritage.

Bergen, in Norway, is said to have the [largest gingerbread town](#) in the world. Every year since 1991, [local businesses](#) and thousands of volunteers help to make the "pepperkakebyen" (gingerbread town).

Poland is also famous for its [gingerbread cookies](#)—so famous they even have a gingerbread museum. These biscuits come in various shapes and varieties and have been a tradition in the city of Torun since the 14th century.

[Several towns and villages](#) in the UK are associated with gingerbread—including Gasmere, Whitby, Preston and [Ormskirk](#).

Gingerbread was incredibly popular in the north of England thanks to the gingerbread ladies of Ormskirk, who began making it as early as 1732. It was so popular, in fact, that King Edward VII would have the royal train stop at Ormskirk on the way to Balmoral to [stock up on gingerbread](#).

## Surprising benefits

Gingerbread is enjoyed in many countries. But while each place may have its own take on the confection, the one thing that remains consistent is the spices they include—the key ingredient being ginger.

Ginger has a long history of use in various forms of traditional and alternative medicine. [Research shows](#) it may aid in digestion, reduce nausea and help fight the common cold and flu.

It's also believed ginger may [support weight management](#), help [manage arthritis](#) and may also alleviate [menstrual symptoms](#).

Molasses is another ingredient sometimes found in gingerbread. It's made by refining sugarcane or sugar beet juice. Molasses is [naturally rich](#) in antioxidants, iron, calcium, magnesium, potassium, phosphorous and vitamin B6. All of these [important vitamins](#) and minerals may help relieve constipation, treat anemia and [support bone](#) and hair health.

Cinnamon is another key ingredient of gingerbread. It's a particularly versatile spice with significant health benefits. It has antimicrobial properties and is also rich in antioxidants—natural molecules that [may help protect](#) against diseases such as [type 2 diabetes](#). Cinnamon may also help lower inflammation and can be a useful [anti-aging ingredient](#) for the skin.

[Research has also shown](#) that it may improve dental hygiene, reduce cholesterol and lower blood pressure.

Similarly, nutmeg—another common ingredient in gingerbread—is associated with [reduced inflammation](#) and may [benefit heart health](#).

While, of course, gingerbread also contains ingredients that aren't good for your health if you eat too much of it (such as sugar), at least you can feel a little less guilty if you indulge in a gingerbread biscuit this [holiday season](#) as it contains some beneficial ingredients.

But for those who feel they need to watch their diet, there are ways you can make gingerbread healthier.

For example, use [almond flour](#) instead of regular flour. This gives a [boost of protein](#), which may make you feel fuller and help stop over-eating. Almond flour is also a great gluten-free option.

You can also swap butter with [coconut oil](#) or [olive oil](#), which may have less of an effect on [cholesterol levels](#) compared to butter.

Adding [nuts](#), [seeds](#) and [raisins](#) to decorate can also be an easy way to add nutrients (such as vitamin E, magnesium and selenium) and fiber.

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