

5 Spices That Not Only Taste Good, They're Good for You

A registered dietitian weighs in on which spices you should always have on hand for flavor—and health.

By **Kristy del Coro**

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Spices are transformative. They are the key to flavorful recipes and are often the differentiating factor that gives a dish a sense of place and origin. The same protein, grain, and vegetable simply prepared with different spices will result in completely different food experiences. In addition to being flavor bombs, spices have incredible health benefits (related to their bioactive compounds) that have been touted since the time of ancient civilizations. And thanks to modern science, many of these spices now also have the evidence-based research to back this up.

As a chef and RD, spices deliver the complete package, boosting both flavor and nutrition (without any downside). A well-stocked pantry of spices will be slightly different for everyone depending on personal flavor preferences and cultural backgrounds, but I've narrowed down my top five spices to keep on hand (along with your other favorites) that are versatile across cuisines and also have the most significant benefits in terms of health, so you can create winning recipes any day of the week.



Credit: Grace Elkus

Cinnamon

CINNAMON-SPICED PUMPKIN MUFFINS

Cinnamon is one of the most familiar and commonly utilized spices and can be used in both sweet and savory cooking.

Health Benefits

There are numerous studies demonstrating cinnamon's blood glucose-lowering effects, including this 2020 study that showed just 500 milligrams of cinnamon (about ¼ teaspoon) three times per day can lower fasting and post-meal blood glucose levels in people with prediabetes. Cinnamon's bioactive compounds collectively have antioxidant, antimicrobial, anticancer, and antifungal activities. There is even some preliminary evidence that cinnamon may help lower total cholesterol and triglycerides.

Culinary Uses

In the kitchen, cinnamon can go far beyond its ubiquitous use in oatmeal and sweet desserts. Cinnamon sticks can be used to infuse cinnamon flavor into beverages, such as cinnamon tea or coffee, or added during the cooking process to a braising liquid, stew, or tomato sauce, or even rice. Ground cinnamon can be added to smoothies, yogurt, granola, baked goods, used as part of a spice rub or seasoning for meat and vegetables, or simply sprinkled on top as a finishing garnish.

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Credit: Caitlin Bense

Turmeric

MANGO-TURMERIC SMOOTHIE

A member of the ginger family, turmeric is an essential ingredient in Indian cuisine, but can be utilized in any home kitchen.

Health Benefits

Turmeric's health benefits are numerous and its active compound *curcumin* is one of the most widely studied phytochemicals due to its powerful anti-inflammatory and anti-cancer benefits. Some studies show curcumin may inhibit the growth of tumor cells as well as reduce inflammatory markers in the body. Turmeric is also being researched for its gut and brain health benefits and may also help lower total cholesterol and triglycerides. Additionally, there is some evidence that curcumin may play a role in managing symptoms of depression as well as be integrated into therapeutic treatments for Alzheimer's disease.

Culinary Uses

Turmeric is a root, similar to ginger, that can be consumed freshly grated or dried. Dried ground turmeric is what you will find in the spice aisle. Turmeric can be added to a variety of foods from vegetables and grains to soups and stews to curries, as well as smoothies and snacks, such as turmeric-spiced nuts and popcorn. It is a key ingredient in "golden milk," due to its signature golden hue. To optimize absorption, it is best to consume turmeric after it has been heated in some kind of fat (oil or butter) and also paired with piperine, the active ingredient in black and white pepper.

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Credit: Michael Paul

Ginger

GINGER CHICKEN SOUP WITH VEGETABLES

Ginger can be consumed as a fresh root or dried and ground, used as a spice.

Health Benefits

Ginger contains an active compound called gingerol, which contains phytonutrients that acts as an antioxidant along with antiviral, antifungal, antibacterial, anti-inflammatory, and analgesic properties. Both scientific and anecdotal evidence shows that ginger can help alleviate nausea and vomiting, specifically related to those symptoms during pregnancy and chemotherapy.

Ginger consumption may also help alleviate pain associated with rheumatism. Specific amounts in studies vary, but conclude that generally less than 1 teaspoon of ground ginger per day will provide effective relief.

Culinary Uses

Dried ginger has a strong concentrated flavor, especially if recently opened. Ground ginger is used commonly in baked goods paired with falls spices, such as cinnamon, clove, and nutmeg, but is also a great spice to use in savory dishes. It works well in spice rubs for meat and poultry, as well as marinades for vegetables and tofu. Ground ginger is also commonly found in North African spice blends, such as ras el hanout.

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Credit: Jennifer Causey

Fennel Seeds

SPICY FENNEL FRIED SHRIMP AND CELER

Fennel seeds, the seeds of the fennel plant, have a licorice or anise aroma and flavor, and can be consumed whole on their own or used in cooking.

Health Benefits

The active compound *anethole* is what gives fennel its pronounced anise aroma and flavor as well as its health benefits. Anethole has anti-inflammatory, antimicrobial, and antioxidant properties as well as aids in digestion. Just 1 tablespoon of fennel seeds delivers 2 grams of fiber and is an excellent source of manganese (an important mineral for a variety of bodily functions, including metabolism, calcium absorption, blood sugar regulation, brain and nerve function). Fennel seeds also contain calcium, iron, magnesium, and potassium.

Culinary Uses

Fennel seeds are used in sweet and savory dishes around the world. In Ayurvedic medicine, they are commonly chewed and eaten after meals to aid in digestion. Fennel seeds can be added to breads and crackers before baking as well as used in spice blends and seasonings for fish, poultry, and seafood. To enhance their flavor, lightly toast the fennel seeds in a dry pan before using.

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Credit: Jennifer Causey

Paprika

PAPRIKA PORK TENDERLOIN WITH ROASTED POTATOES AND DILL CREAM

Paprika is found in three varieties: sweet, hot, and smoked (linked to the variety of red pepper used before drying and grinding) and all can be just the right addition to take your dish to the next level.

Health Benefits

Paprika contains the active compound *capsaicin*, recognized for a number of health benefits due to its antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties. Keep in mind, the hotter the paprika, the more capsaicin it will contain. Paprika also contains a surprisingly concentrated amount of vitamins and minerals, including iron, vitamin A, vitamin E, and vitamin B6, as well as a variety of phytochemicals. Just 1 tablespoon of paprika provides nearly 20 percent of your daily requirement for vitamin A.

Culinary Uses

There is a use for all three varieties of paprika depending on your flavor preferences and the dish. Sweet paprika, often referred to as Hungarian paprika, is the most all-purpose form of paprika due to its mild heat level and sweet notes. Smoked paprika, often referred to as Spanish Pimenton Paprika, is a great way to add smoky flavor without actually smoking food, and can be the perfect way to impart a meaty flavor in plant-based dishes. Hot paprika will be labeled as such, and can be a great alternative to cayenne pepper. To bring out the best flavor and optimize the absorption of all those great phytochemicals, paprika is ideally heated in some fat, rather than just sprinkling on a dish after it is prepared.

By Kristy del Coro

