

Health Benefits of Spices



In February, we will explore the health practices of the Medieval Ages, an era when spices were valued for their medicinal properties.

Spices in the Medieval Ages

During the Medieval Ages, which lasted roughly from 476 to the late 15th century, spices were viewed as a symbol of status. Spices are made from the seeds, berries, bark, or roots of a plant. Many highly regarded spices, both historically and in modern times, originate from Indonesia and India.

Commonly traded spices include cinnamon, clove, garlic, ginger, pepper, and turmeric. European climates could not grow the plants needed to produce these spices, causing Europe to heavily rely on trade with the East in order to obtain them for culinary and medicinal purposes. This became known as the Spice Trade. Since these spices came from far away lands, many myths arose which made spices even more mysterious and exotic for Europeans.

Spices played a significant role in medieval cuisine by enhancing the flavors, colors, and aromas of recipes. Also, apothecaries, which are the modern equivalent to pharmacies, contained numerous spices and other ingredients to produce medicines to be ingested or applied topically. Due to their efficacy in medicinal uses, spices became linked to the idea of “wellness,” a sense of spiritual and physical health. Spices were thus a display of well-being and were thought to relieve physical distress. During this time, spices were only available to the wealthy. However, now many spices are relatively cheap at the grocery store making it much easier to use spices in everyday life.

****It is essential to note that these spices should be used in moderation as part of a nutritious diet. Excessive consumption may lead to digestive discomfort and other health conditions. If you have specific health conditions or concerns, it is always best to consult with a healthcare professional before adding these spices to your diet.**

Cinnamon

Cinnamon is known for its strong, sweet, and spicy flavor, however the spice may also provide valuable health benefits. Studies have shown that cinnamon can help lower blood sugar levels in individuals with type 2 diabetes and high blood sugar levels. The use of cinnamon adds a sweeter taste to foods and beverages without adding sugar.

Meal Tips:

- Sprinkle cinnamon on your yogurt, fruit, or cereals
- Add a dash of cinnamon to stews, chillies, and meat rubs

Clove

Dating back to the Medieval Ages, clove was used medicinally for dental care due to its antiseptic and anti-inflammatory properties. Clove is high in antioxidants, which aim to reduce oxidative stress that can damage cells and tissues. Oxidative stress can play a role in the development of chronic diseases, so clove may be a beneficial spice to reduce the potential for long term conditions.

Meal Tips:

- Include in marinades or sauces
- Add to baked goods, such as gingerbread, pies, and cookies

Garlic

Garlic may provide heart healthy benefits. Studies have shown the link between garlic and its ability to keep blood vessels more flexible. This may reduce the potential for developing atherosclerosis, which puts individuals at greater risk for heart attacks and strokes. Garlic may also play a role in reducing high levels of cholesterol and triglycerides.

Meal Tips:

- Use garlic powder to flavor dishes
- Combine with olive oil and pepper to add flavor when roasting vegetables

Ginger

Ginger may play a role in alleviating stomach pains, diarrhea, and nausea. The spice contains anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties that have been seen to warm the stomach and digestive tract. Ginger can be purchased in a variety of forms, including candies and lollipops for upset stomachs, dried powders for cooking, or fresh for teas.

Meal Tips:

- Use ginger in homemade salad dressings
- Add to stir fry recipes, teas, and smoothies

Pepper

Perhaps the most commonly used spice during the Medieval Ages, pepper provides distinct flavor and contains some valuable health properties. Pepper may help stimulate the digestion and absorption of foods. It may also decrease gas buildup and discomfort in the intestines. The active compounds in pepper may also contribute to immune support by fighting off bacteria.

Meal Tips:

- Create a peppercorn sauce for steak and chicken
- Add to various soups and stews

Turmeric

Turmeric has been shown to reduce inflammation, which can be helpful for individuals with arthritis. Curcumin, the primary component of turmeric, may decrease inflammation in the brain. A recent study reported that adult participants over 50 who consumed curcumin for 18 months displayed enhanced memory test scores and fewer indicators associated with cognitive decline.

Meal Tips:

- Use turmeric as a rub for vegetables and meats
- Sprinkle on tacos and stir-fries
- Try out turmeric tea

References

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