

## Spice Up Your Diet

Ever since Hillary Clinton announced that she ate hot peppers to stay healthy and rev up her metabolism, a lot of people have asked me about the benefits of spicy foods and spices in general. Senator Clinton is definitely on to something, since phytonutrients—plant chemicals that can have antioxidant and other health properties—are concentrated in many herbs and spices. These herbs and spices not only can add a lot of flavor to your food, but a lot of preliminary research is showing that they may add health benefits, as well. I hope you will be cooking more often during the holiday season and I urge you to learn more about beneficial spices and get creative about incorporating them into your recipes.

### Hot Peppers

Chili peppers, chili powder and cayenne pepper all contain a phytonutrient called capsaicin, which is what gives spicy foods their hot “kick,” and it seems to have anti-inflammatory and pain-relieving properties (it is even the active ingredient in many topical pain relievers). Early studies have even shown that capsaicin holds promise for killing prostate and skin cancer cells. Researchers suspect that it may also kill the bacteria that causes most stomach ulcers. Finally, capsaicin helps thin the blood to prevent strokes and heart attacks. Fresh peppers are also high in vitamin C, a potent antioxidant.

Use fresh peppers and dried chili pepper seasonings to spice up salads, stews, soups and ethnic dishes like Thai curry, salsa, jerk sauce and even good old American chili.

### Ginger

The beneficial phytonutrients in ginger are gingerols and shogaols. These are new words, even to me, and it seems that they're unique to ginger. These two phytonutrients are responsible for ginger's pungent/hot flavor. They also work directly on the digestive tract to aid in



digestion and calm motion sickness, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea and flatulence. Gingerols and shogaols also seem to be responsible for the anti-inflammatory activity of ginger. In Chinese medicine, ginger is often used to help treat inflammatory diseases like rheumatoid arthritis. The anti-inflammatory properties can also be useful for controlling migraines, chronic pain, muscle aches and arthritis. In the cardiovascular system, ginger can act like aspirin to reduce the stickiness of the blood and prevent the production of the hormones that mediate inflammation. Finally, these powerful phytonutrients help some people control allergy and cold symptoms when drunk as a tea. A word of caution, however: people with gallstones and those with blood-

clotting disorders or on blood thinners should not self-medicate with ginger.

Ginger comes in many forms, ranging from fresh ginger root, dried powdered ginger, crystallized ginger, pickled ginger (which you eat with your sushi), ginger juice, ginger beer (my favorite) and powdered ginger extracts in dietary supplements. It can also be used in a variety of ways. As a seasoning, it can be peeled and minced, like garlic, and added to foods. In powdered form, it can be used in baking and cooking (in gingerbread, for example). Crystallized ginger is often eaten plain or used in desserts. Many people like to fight off colds with ginger tea by steeping a one-inch piece of freshly grated gingerroot



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in two cups of boiling water for 10 to 15 minutes. I even know someone who puts ginger slices in her coffee pot when she brews coffee! For tummy troubles, try *Reed's* Extra Ginger Beer (it's non-alcoholic) or combine one tablespoon ginger juice (made with a garlic press), one tablespoon lime juice and one tablespoon honey.

## Turmeric

Turmeric is a spice that comes from a rhizome (an underground stem), much like ginger. It is usually dried and ground and added to curry powder and is what gives curry its bright golden color. Curcumin is the phytonutrient in turmeric that makes it one of the healthiest spices in the world. Some studies have shown that this antioxidant and anti-inflammatory can help prevent cancer, including skin, breast, colon, stomach, liver, oral and esophageal cancers. Curcumin's anti-inflammatory properties also seem to help prevent diabetes and lessen its severity in those who already have it. It is also useful for preventing Crohn's disease, psoriasis and rheumatoid arthritis. Though research is only in the preliminary stages, there even seems to be an association between turmeric intake and decreased risk of Alzheimer's disease, as people in India consume large quantities of turmeric daily and have much lower rates of the disease than we do. Turmeric also contains vitamins B6 and C, iron, potassium and manganese.

I try to add turmeric powder to my cooking whenever possible. I add it to my

granola along with cinnamon and allspice, and I use it to season fish and soups. If you don't care for the taste, add it to strongly flavored sauces, where its presence will not be detected. You can also cook with curry powder since it contains turmeric and has a more familiar, less astringent flavor. Yellow mustard usually contains turmeric.

## Rosemary, Oregano and Mint

All members of the peppermint family, these herbs contain the polyphenol rosmarinic acid, which is a potent antioxidant. Both rosemary and oregano have been shown to prevent carcinogenic heterocyclic amines (HCAs) from forming on cooked meat. All three also have been shown to help prevent certain cancers, especially those associated with radiation exposure. They are beneficial for lung health as well; studies have shown improvements in asthma, lessening in damage caused by air pollutants and lung cancer tumor reductions. They also help to retard bacterial growth on food, so they can be useful in preventing *E. coli* infections in meat. Finally these herbs are important for digestive health. They can help kill stomach ulcer-causing bacteria, peppermint being especially helpful for soothing the symptoms associated with Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS). Oregano and mint contain carotenoids such as beta carotene, lutein and zeaxanthin, as well as many other vitamins and minerals.

Chop the fresh herbs and add them to salads, salad dressings, marinades and soups. They pair especially well with meat, poultry and fish and can be used to season them in

either fresh or dried form. All three herbs are commonly used in Middle Eastern and Mediterranean cuisines. In general, rosemary loses a lot of flavor when it is dried, so try to use it fresh.

## Garlic

Garlic contains sulfur compounds called allyl sulfides that may help prevent the growth of certain cancerous tumors, especially those of the stomach and prostate. The sulfides can also help reduce cholesterol and make the blood less sticky, thereby reducing the risk of stroke and heart attack. These sulfur compounds may also help boost our immune systems. Other plant compounds in garlic called saponins may help lower blood cholesterol and fight cancer. Garlic is also high in the antioxidant mineral selenium, which is important for immune function and cancer prevention.

The key to reaping all of garlic's health benefits is crushing, chopping or slicing the cloves before using in order to release these phytonutrients, as whole cloves do not contain the active forms of allyl sulfides. To maximize their healthful properties, let prepared garlic sit for 10 to 15 minutes before cooking with it. Add garlic to any savory dish to enhance its flavor. It goes especially well with other vegetables, meats and fish.

## Cilantro and Coriander

Cilantro and coriander are parts of the same plant, making it both an herb and a spice. The leaves and stems are called cilantro and the seeds are called coriander. The plant contains over 13 phytonutrients, including quercetin and limonene. The herb and spice may aid in blood sugar control and might help lower cholesterol levels. They may also help fight cancer and aid in the secretion of digestive enzymes. Cilantro and coriander contain iron, magnesium and manganese.

Some people carry a gene that makes cilantro taste like soap, but to other people it has a pleasantly pungent, fresh, green flavor. Coriander is one of the main ingredients in curry powder and is therefore commonly used in Indian and Asian cuisines. Both the herb and spice are also used in Mexican, Mediterranean and Middle Eastern cooking. Add them to salsas, soups, stews, curries, salads, vegetables, fish and chicken dishes.

## Parsley

Parsley is not just a garnish; it's also a spice that can add spectacular flavor and nutrition to many recipes. Think of it as a concentrated form of spinach that contains the antioxidants lutein, zeaxanthin and beta carotene, which help protect your eyes



from cataracts and macular degeneration. Parsley is also an excellent source of a phytonutrient called apigenin, which seems to help maintain thyroid, skin, colon, prostate and breast health. Parsley's most noticeable benefit is that it freshens your breath. It contains chlorophyll, which helps destroy the odor of garlic and onion on your breath when it is chewed. Parsley is also a source of iron, iodine and vitamin C.

Both curly and flat parsley complement the flavors of poultry (including duck), fish, seafood, eggs, artichokes, cabbage, carrots, celery, onions, peas, potatoes and zucchini. Curly parsley is best in cold dishes, while Italian (aka flat leaf) parsley holds up better in hot foods.

### Cinnamon

Cinnamon contains cinnamaldehyde, an essential oil that gives it both its flavor and aroma. Studies have shown it to be beneficial for blood sugar control and insulin sensitivity in people with insulin resistance and type 2 diabetes. It also seems to lower LDL cholesterol and triglyceride levels. Additionally, cinnamaldehyde has antibacterial, antifungal and anti-inflammatory activity. Cinnamon is effective in preventing gout and arthritis flare-ups. The spice also contains calcium, iron, manganese and fiber.

Sprinkle cinnamon powder in cereal, smoothies and coffee. It can be used in baking and to season meats. Cinnamon can be combined with turmeric, ginger and cumin to make a Middle Eastern-flavored seasoning for meat and poultry.

### Cloves

Cloves contain the phytonutrient eugenol, which has anti-inflammatory, antibacterial and pain-reducing properties. Cloves are very effective for toothaches (just chew on a clove to relieve pain) and for relieving inflammation. They have been shown to lower blood sugar, triglycerides and LDL cholesterol. Eugenol is also a digestive aid, as cloves can be used to relieve flatulence, cramping and vomiting. Cloves contain vitamins C and K, manganese, magnesium, calcium and fiber.

Cloves are used frequently in Mexican and Indian cuisines to make sauces and to flavor meat and fish. They are also often used in American recipes for cakes, pies and cookies, as well as for making pickles and corned beef. Whole dried cloves can last up to a year, but ground cloves will only keep for six months before the flavor is diminished.

Fresh herbs are always my first choice, but dried herbs are a fine substitute. Dried



## Cabbage Cuts Cancer Risk

In certain cultures, cabbage is a dietary staple. Polish women, for example, tend to eat a lot of cabbage—about 30 pounds a year—and it seems to impart a healthy dose of breast cancer prevention. A study from earlier this year has found that women in Poland who ate about three ounces of cabbage (one and a quarter cup) three times a week had a 66% lower chance of developing breast cancer than their American peers (who eat only eat about ten pounds of cabbage a year).

Cabbage contains phytonutrients called glucosinolates. Glucosinolates are considered “indirect” antioxidants because they signal our bodies to make our own antioxidants. The antioxidants that we make ourselves are important because they can be produced for three or four days after we eat a food like cabbage, whereas antioxidants that we eat tend to leave our systems in a matter of hours. These “indirect” antioxidants play an important role in breast cancer prevention. Glucosinolates also seem to help stimulate our body's own internal detoxification system.

Raw, fermented (sauerkraut) and lightly cooked (steamed or blanched) cabbage have the highest levels of glucosinolates. The more cabbage is cooked, the more glucosinolates are destroyed, so try to incorporate mostly raw green and red cabbage into your diet at least three times a week. It is easy to add shredded cabbage to your salads or have sauerkraut as a side dish at lunch or dinner. Broccoli, cauliflower and Brussels sprouts also contain glucosinolates, though in smaller quantities than cabbage. However, all of these vegetables, when eaten regularly, show promise for fighting breast, ovarian, prostate, lung, pancreatic and stomach cancers.

spices and herbs should only be stored for one year at the most from the time they are opened. Older spices lose their potency and flavor if they are stored for longer than that (ground cloves and coriander only keep for half a year).

Although most people think of herbs and spices as a way to add flavor and interest to recipes, they actually add healthful properties to ordinary foods. I urge you to become more adventurous with your seasonings and try

cooking more ethnic and highly spiced foods. Marinades made with olive oil, vinegar and herbs and spices (fresh or dried) are a great way to start experimenting, or play with seasoning your veggies with more than just salt and pepper. Even if you only add small quantities of these healthful herbs and spices to your food, you may end up with some significant health benefits. There is a reason to season this holiday season!

## Food of the Month: Winter Squash



What do acorn squash, zucchini, cucumber and watermelon have in common? They're all delicious, nutritious members of the gourd family. Winter squashes, with their hard, protective shells, were a staple of the colonial American diet because they could be stored for up to three months in winter. However, you don't have to be a colonial American or Charlie Brown to enjoy a good pumpkin, or even a nice spaghetti squash, for that matter. Winter squashes come in over 100 varieties, and no matter which type you choose to cook up, you're bound to reap some nutritional benefits.

These starchy vegetables are high in fiber and other complex carbohydrates, so they give you energy but not a lot of calories. Starchy vegetables can help control your weight and appetite by keeping your blood sugar at even levels when paired with some protein and healthful fat. The orange-fleshed squash varieties, like sugar pie pumpkin, banana, kabocha and butternut, are loaded with beta-carotene. This phytonutrient is converted into vitamin

A in our bodies and acts as an antioxidant to help protect against cancer and cataract development. It has also been shown to boost immune function.

A serving of winter squash is just one cup of cooked cubed or mashed flesh (the skin and most seeds are inedible). Depending on the variety, they can range from 80–120 calories and 4–10 grams of fiber per serving. Squashes are also an excellent source of vitamins C and potassium.

This fall, Gelson's offers many squash varieties, including butternut, delicata, sugar pie pumpkin, spaghetti, kabocha, acorn, gold nugget, banana and sweet dumpling. Winter squash is the freshest in the fall and winter, but has more beta-carotene in the spring and summer, after it has been stored for a while. When selecting your squash, look for a smooth, dry rind that is free of soft spots and cracks. A good specimen is dull, velvety, and heavy for its size. Edible pumpkins are sugar pumpkins, which weigh less than seven pounds (jack-o-lanterns for carving and mini decorative pumpkins are not edible). Most

of the other winter squashes you'll find in Gelson's produce department this fall and winter will be edible and delicious—just ask if you're not sure. You can store whole winter squashes for over three months if you keep them in a cool, dry place (pumpkins only keep for about a month). Cut squash can be kept up to a week if wrapped tightly and stored in the refrigerator.

Preparing winter squash for cooking is the hard part. Wash them well to start. You can bake a whole squash, which is the easiest and most nutritious option. They can be cooked fully when whole or just long enough to soften it for cutting. Either way, you must pierce it deeply in several places around the top first and then set it in a baking pan. Never cook or microwave one whole—it will explode! To split a raw gourd, make a notch in the rind with a heavy knife. Place the blade in the groove and tap the base of the knife (near the handle) with your fist or a mallet until it cuts through. Remove the strings and seeds and peel with a vegetable peeler or paring knife, if desired. Boiling, steaming, roasting, baking, microwaving and pressure cooking are all viable options for cooking cut pieces, which can then be added to soups, stews and tarts or mashed. Pair squash with flavorful cheeses, garlic, mushrooms, sage, thyme, rosemary, cinnamon, cayenne pepper, ginger or nuts. This month, try my recipes for Pumpkin Soup and Spiced Butternut Squash.

While Jessica is away on maternity leave, her newsletters will still be published monthly in the form of "Best of Jessica's Nutrition Notes." She is including past articles that have been popular and are also relevant to the themes of pregnancy and parenthood.