Powerful Anti-Inflammatory Spice, Turmeric

By Dr. Alyssa Musgrove

Herbs and spices have been used throughout the ages, not only to enhance the flavor of foods, but also for improving health and fighting disease. These low-calorie powerhouses have incredible health benefits due to their anti-inflammatory, antibacterial and antioxidant activity. In fact, herbs and spices have more antioxidants than fruits and vegetables, and allow you to add more flavor without adding salt, sugar or fat.

One of the best spices for improving your health is turmeric. Commonly used in Indian curries, turmeric is part of the ginger family and comes from the root of the Curcuma plant. The main active ingredient in turmeric, curcumin, has potent anti-inflammatory effects. Inflammation, if left untreated, can become a chronic health issue. And unlike aspirin or ibuprofen, curcumin reduces inflammation naturally, without damaging the liver or kidneys.

Here are some of the top health benefits of turmeric supported by research:

**Arthritis.** One recent study found that osteoarthritis patients who added 200 mg of curcumin a day to their treatment plan experienced reduced pain and increased mobility. Another study done with patients suffering with active rheumatoid arthritis showed significant reduction in tenderness and swelling of the joints when using curcumin. The study also pointed out that curcumin treatment was found to be safe and did not have any adverse side effects.

**Alzheimer’s Disease (AD).** Many studies are being done on the effectiveness of turmeric for preventing and treating Alzheimer’s. Curcumin has been shown to help with reducing the amyloid plaques, or “tangles” of protein in the brain, associated with the disease. Curcumin also has anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties that benefit the brain tissue. One study published in the *Annals of Indian Academy of Neurology* found turmeric helped improve the memory of patients with AD. There is no real treatment for AD, so prevention is key. Eating a low-inflammatory diet consisting of vegetables, fruits and lean meats, and spicing your foods with turmeric, is a great place to start.

**Depression.** Studies show curcumin can help increase levels of Brain-Derived Neurotrophic Factor (BDNF), a type of growth hormone in the brain linked to depression. Increasing levels of BDNF with curcumin has been shown to help fight depression. Other studies have shown curcumin can boost serotonin and dopamine levels, which also helps in reducing depression. One study found curcumin was as effective as Prozac in helping improve depression symptoms.

**Heart Disease.** Turmeric has been shown to reduce the oxidation of cholesterol in the body, which causes the plaques that lead to heart attack and stroke. Turmeric also contains vitamin B6, which helps reduce the homocysteine levels that can lead to increased heart disease risk. Other heart healthy benefits of turmeric include its ability to lower total cholesterol, raise HDL (”good” cholesterol) and lower LDL (“bad” cholesterol). One study showed an 11.63 percent decrease in total cholesterol, a 33 percent decrease in LDL cholesterol, and a 29 percent increase in HDL cholesterol when volunteers took 500mg of curcumin daily for seven days. Turmeric has also been shown to significantly lower triglycerides.

**Cancer.** There are many studies that have been done on the benefits of curcumin in cancer treatment. Even PubMed, which provides the quality control in scientific publishing, acknowledges curcumin’s anti-cancer abilities. One study at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center found curcumin was able to differentiate cancer cells from normal healthy cells and create apoptosis (cell death) in only the cancer cells. Curcumin was also able to improve the health of non-cancerous cells.

Further research is also suggesting turmeric may be a promising therapy for other conditions, including Parkinson’s, diabetes, metabolic syndrome, high blood pressure, irritable bowel syndrome and gingivitis.

Turmeric can easily be incorporated into your diet and has an earthy, peppery flavor. Add it to sautéed or roasted vegetables (such as cauliflower and broccoli), salad dressings, smoothies, fish, chicken, red meat, and soups -- especially lentil soup. Just be sure to use turmeric rather than curry powder, since a study found that pure turmeric powder had the highest concentration of curcumin. It is important to use the spice in conjunction with healthy fats such as coconut oil, olive oil, ghee (clarified butter) or coconut milk, as the fats help increase absorption. Using black pepper with turmeric also helps to improve absorption.

You can buy organic turmeric powder at the grocery store in the spice section, or fresh in the produce section near the ginger. The raw root herb is usually a few inches long, has a tough brown skin, deep orange flesh and fragrance that resembles a combination of orange and ginger. One caution: curcumin is a very potent yellow pigment and can permanently discolor surfaces when chopping if you aren't careful.

Many people choose to take turmeric in a supplement form. I have had great success recommending supplements containing turmeric to my patients. It has been approved by the FDA, and doses of around 200 to 400mg daily for prolonged periods have been found to be safe and beneficial. If you have a chronic inflammatory condition, you may want to take about 1,800mg per day. Again, for best absorption make sure to take your supplement with a healthy fat such as coconut oil or olive oil, or take your supplement with a meal that contains healthy fats.

Turmeric can impact your platelet activity, so if you are scheduled for surgery, or use a blood thinner such as Coumadin, you may want to avoid turmeric and make sure to discuss your use of turmeric with your doctor.

The health benefits of turmeric are many and undeniable. This spice should be at the top of the list for anyone looking to improve her health in a natural, drug-free way.