



Ayurvedic clinic: Spice up your life

Finding perfect balance and health through ayurveda, yoga's sister science.

By Dr. Vijay Murthy

Ayurveda and spices go hand in hand. But will just adding healing spices really make any difference to your overall health? Time and again, over dinner with friends, I have heard people tell me they feel inspired to use turmeric or ginger in their diets because of the health benefits they've read about. It's great people are taking an active interest in improving their health. However, it's also easy to misunderstand the nature of spices; suddenly adding a random spice to your dinner is not going to be enough to produce fantastic health benefits.

In fact, the most important (and overlooked) aspect when using spices is in what form it is used. A blunt analogy would be when we are dehydrated in only having showers instead of actually drinking water to re-hydrate ourselves. For re-hydration to be successful you do need to drink the water and not just pour it over your head. Similarly, every spice has health benefits - but only if you use it in a particular way; and even then, this is dependent on your current gut environment. Again, to be blunt, throwing every healthy food imaginable (including spices) into a blender each morning for your green smoothie may only produce expensive waste for the toilet. A little thought and planning, though, can go a long way in making spices work for you.

Know your gut health

This is where you need to look not just at adding a few spices to your plate but also at your diet in general. Again, let's be honest here: if you eat wheat (or gluten-containing food) and have sugars (including fruits), no matter how healthy and fit you think you are, your gut is bound to be vulnerable to a condition called 'dysbiosis', which is often referred to as 'leaky gut'. An ayurvedic practitioner would say your gut's fire is dysfunctional and that you are prone to *ama*, a Sanskrit term meaning 'toxins'.

Likewise, if you don't generally eat wheat, (or gluten-containing food) and don't have any form of sugars (except honey for therapeutic purposes), you are much more likely to have a robust gut (good *agni*, or 'digestive fire') that is strong enough to digest even raw or fresh spices like ginger.

But how do you know? Perhaps if you've taken an interest in spices it could be because you have noticed a gut health issue already; you may well have loose stools, or constipation, or both. Maybe you are extra tired or have noticed a lack of actual hunger, sweet cravings or a coating on your tongue. These are all clues that something is just not quite right.

Practical steps

If you can relate to any of this, then the best way to start improving your overall health is by cooking with spices. When we use spices such as ginger, fennel, cumin and turmeric they can help to protect the gut from damages due to wheat and sugar (sorry, no, that does not mean you can start bingeing on cream cakes and pizza).

For starters, you're actually better off drinking spice teas such as ginger with lemon throughout the day rather than throwing a big chunk of fresh ginger into your morning smoothie. From an ayurvedic perspective, it's easier to digest and absorb spices as teas than having them raw, as when we cook spices (or add to boiling water), you will have activated the phytoconstituents (a term for active ingredients present in a spice or a herb). This means that even if your gut is a bit sluggish, the now pre-activated spices (by warming or cooking) are more likely to be absorbed after digestion. A word of warning, however: that garam masala you just found in the back of your cupboard, although it will list all of the spices mentioned here, is not the same as fresh spices. Whilst supermarket

spices can make us salivate, add flavour to our food, and have the uncanny knack of making our curtains smell like curry, they will never have the same benefits of freshly prepared spices. This is because most spices, once ground, no matter how well packaged, lose their potency within six months. In general it is best to not stock spices for too long and to buy small quantities at a time to use in cooking as needed.

Taking turmeric

Turmeric is fabulous (anti-inflammatory, good for regulating sugar levels with high antioxidants and much more) but its absorption is difficult to achieve. It has a reputation for not crossing the gut wall easily, which is why cooking turmeric in water is one way to make it more readily absorbable. The other way to improve turmeric's bio-availability is to combine it with spices of the piperacea family. These are readily available in the form of black pepper. Several research studies have shown that by combining black pepper with turmeric, the availability of the phytoconstituents in turmeric is actually increased.

Many people get noticeable benefits from turmeric when they take capsules of Curcumin (the active ingredient in turmeric). If you have an Indian grocery store nearby, you can try experimenting with fresh turmeric, which you can add to your green smoothies, warm teas, cooked grains and vegetables or even meats. From my own clinical experience, I have noticed that clients who report intolerance to cow's milk, when they add turmeric and ginger to milk that is boiled, their tolerance improves. So if you do start to notice food intolerances, before giving up your favourite foods and dreading a life of hardship and abstinence, it might be worth trying recipes using spices.



Spices are good for you

No matter what we do or how much we wish it to be true, potato chips fried in ghee or clarified butter with a bit of turmeric thrown over them will never be a healthy snack. However, if you lightly roast spices such as cumin, black mustard, fennel, fenugreek, coriander seeds or asafetida (a smelly resin that has great flavour when fried and has innumerable health benefits) and use on roasted vegetables, you will benefit from the fat-soluble phytoconstituents.

Spices are good for you and have amazing qualities but these healing properties are only a reality if they are used properly. So next time when you think or read about spices, try to remember that to activate them it needs to be done by boiling in water or by adding to fat. This is called, hydrophilic and lipophilic phenomena, meaning the essential ingredients in spices are either released into water or are released into fat.

Growing up in India, spices are imbedded in my psyche, and so for me I am used to seeing my mother and aunts, mix, grind and cook them with meals. A qualified ayurvedic practitioner can share how best to use spices for your own individual health benefits. As well as enjoying great new flavours, it can hopefully bring you renewed health. ॐ

Dr Vijay Murthy is a London-based ayurvedic doctor and a member of the Ayurvedic Practitioners Association (apa.uk.com).

Ayu Sanskrit
(from *Ayush* meaning lifespan)...

Definition:
Health...Life...

Veda Sanskrit
(from *vid* meaning to know)...

Definition:
Knowledge...Science...

Ayurveda Sanskrit

- Science and art of improving quality of life and longevity...
- ageless knowledge of health through life...
- the oldest complete health system...

Definition:
THE SCIENCE OF LIFE

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