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Super Spices for Heart Health

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The medicinal benefits of spices and herbs have been recognized since the earliest civilizations. Spices and herbs are truly kitchen superstars because in addition to adding rich flavor and interest to foods, they are powerhouses of antioxidants and phytochemicals, compounds that offer disease-protection. Environmental toxins and free radicals, which are abundant in our air, water, soil, and food supply, cause cell damage and trigger inflammation and disease. Antioxidants and phytochemicals offer disease protection at the cellular level. Here are seven super spices and herbs that can boost immune function, reduce inflammation, protecting against heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and other chronic conditions.

CINNAMON is a fragrant and popular spice and rich in antioxidants and polyphenols, a specific class of phytochemicals. Polyphenols can function in a way similar to insulin, the hormone that helps regulate blood glucose (sugar) levels. Cinnamon can be beneficial for those individuals with pre-diabetes or diabetes. Cinnamon is not just for pumpkin pie and cinnamon rolls; try adding a dash to your coffee or hot chocolate, sprinkle it on oatmeal, stir it into peanut butter, and dash on sweet potatoes or carrots.

GARLIC has a strong distinctive flavor and aroma making it a spice people either love or hate garlic. Regardless, garlic has been used for centuries in traditional medicine. Garlic has wonderful anti-fungal, antibacterial, and antiviral properties.

Studies indicate garlic may aid in preventing blood clots in arteries. Garlic can be added to a wide variety of dishes including pasta sauces, pizza, roasted vegetables and/or meats, or finely chopped in homemade spreads.

GINGER is an ancient root herb used throughout history as a remedy for pain and gastrointestinal distress (upset stomach, bloating, and gas) due to its anti-spasm properties. Gingerol is the active ingredient. Ginger also helps stimulate the secretion of mucus, making it helpful in quieting the cough and scratchy throat of a common cold. Try making ginger lemonade or tea, add ginger to salad dressings, and rice and vegetable dishes.

OREGANO is extremely rich in antioxidants and unique because it contains rosmarinic acid, thymol, and carvacol, all compounds proven to fight off infection and the growth of bacteria and parasites. Oregano has four times the antioxidant power as blueberries. So, why not shake extra oregano onto your pizza and add to other traditional dishes? Oregano is easy to grow at home; adding greenery and a pleasant aroma to your kitchen window.

RED CHILI PEPPERS contain capsaicin, the powerful compound responsible for the heat in chilies. The greater the hotness and intensity of the pepper, the higher it is in capsaicin and antioxidants. Cayenne or ground red pepper are highest in capsaicin, but all red peppers, including chili powder and the milder paprika, are good sources of antioxidants. The hottest peppers are habanero or Scotch bonnet, while less hot peppers include jalapenos, Spanish pimentos, or cherry peppers. The health benefits of red peppers include pain relief, heart health, fighting prostate cancer, and preventing ulcers. Adding some hot spice to your meal may be great for your waistline. Studies show that people consuming meals with foods rich in chilies ate fewer calories at that meal and even at the next meal. One theory is that capsaicin acts by increasing a person's satiety, or a feeling of fullness. In addition, they appear to boost metabolism by increasing calorie burning.

THYME is a strong flavored herb that compliments comfort foods like wintry soups, stews, roasts. Thyme is rich in flavonoids, phytochemicals with anti-inflammatory properties that offer heart disease protection. Thyme oil has antiseptic and antibacterial

properties making it beneficial in fighting bacteria-resistant infections. Thyme may also help in maintaining cognitive function as we age.

TURMERIC is yellow due to curcumin, a powerful antioxidant with anti-inflammatory properties. Strong evidence supports the role of curcumin in heart disease and hypertension protection, inhibition of cancer cell growth, inflammation reduction, and possible safeguard against Alzheimer's disease. Turmeric is the principle ingredient in curry. A little turmeric goes a long way; try adding it to egg salad and look for recipes calling for curry.

Spices and herbs provide rich flavor and disease-protection in each spoonful. Be adventurous; add more spice to your diet!