



December 6, 2016 – Grand Rapids, MI

The Science Behind Holiday Spices: Cloves

No one has to tell us that Christmas and the New Year are coming; it's in the air. You can smell the holiday season this time of year. This week, I'm going to cover three spices used this time of year and talk about some of the potential health benefits of each. I'm not suggesting their use makes foods healthy if they're also high in sugar and fat—just that there's some interesting science behind these spices.

If you prepare a ham or a pumpkin pie for a holiday dinner, you'll probably recognize the pungent smell of cloves. These are the flower buds of a tree in the family Myrtaceae, *Syzygium aromaticum*. They're not generally eaten but add a distinct flavor when heated, and the oils and phytonutrients are passed on to the cooked food.

A Victorian Christmas tradition was to make and give pomanders of an orange studded with whole cloves; Paula has a friend who makes these, and the smell is wonderful.



There has been research into the health benefits of cloves. Researchers are examining the phytonutrients within the cloves for possible use in blood sugar control and weight loss (1); it seems they may interfere with some of the enzymes that break down carbohydrates, and if the food is never absorbed, you don't get the calories. Another group of researchers are examining cloves for their potential use in the treatment of stomach cancer (2). Don't get too excited; research hasn't even gotten to trials on animals. But there does seem to be some beneficial effects so far in each area.

So when you eat the ham or pumpkin pie, you may be getting benefits beyond the tastes and smells we associate with the holidays. We'll look at nutmeg on Thursday.

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

References:

1. BMC Complement Altern Med. 2016 Nov 4;16(1):439.
2. Drug Des Devel Ther. 2016 Nov 4;10:3611-3632. eCollection 2016.

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