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The Science Behind Holiday Spices: Cinnamon

As you enjoy that cider spiced with cloves and nutmeg, we'll finish with the most traditional spice of the holiday: cinnamon. It's used in many sweet and savory dishes all year long, but when it comes to smells that conjure up the holidays, no spice really does it better than cinnamon. Not only does cinnamon add a characteristic flavor to many foods, it's one of the most researched spices in health today.

Cinnamon is a spice obtained from the inner bark of several tree species from the genus *Cinnamomum*. Harvesting the cinnamon involves removing branches from a coppiced tree, but new branches will grow for another harvest. The outer bark is peeled off leaving the cinnamon layer, which curls as it dries forming the distinctive cinnamon stick shape.



The phytonutrients from cinnamon are being examined for their health benefits much like the other spices I've discussed this week. The phytonutrients have antioxidant, antimicrobial, and anticancer properties, but most of the research is focused on the benefits for carbohydrate metabolism and prediabetes. In an excellent review article, researchers examined the benefits of all phytonutrients on diabetes (1). The section on cinnamon was extensive and showed the benefits of cinnamon when used as a dietary supplement.

Here's what's missing from the research: there are very few studies that have examined the benefits of spices when used in real foods. In other words, no one has baked an apple pie with and without cinnamon and nutmeg, had people with prediabetes eat it, and demonstrated improved glucose control. The few studies that have been done used spices in very high amounts, enough that that the researchers surveyed the subjects to see if they suffered gastric distress (2). While there were benefits in many health measures, it's probably not realistic to expect consumers would increase their spice consumption to levels that would make the spice flavor overbearing, health benefits or not.

That leaves us with dietary supplements. I've already discussed my views on supplements numerous times, and I am definitely for supplementation. But when we can eat the vegetables or use the spice in cooking on a regular basis, that's a better option in my opinion. Let food be our medicine and leave the supplements for nutrients we can't get from foods or we don't make ourselves. But that's my opinion.



In celebration of the holidays and because we're getting ready to make some holiday treats to send to friends, here's a link to my mother-in-law's recipe for [Candied Pecans](#). I stick with cinnamon, but you could add other spices such as nutmeg, cloves, or even chili powder or cayenne pepper to suit your palate; peppers have great phytonutrients as well.

Enjoy your holidays with all the special spices; then when the holidays are over, look for ways to use more spices in the foods you regularly eat. For example, did you know Cincinnati chili often contains chocolate, cinnamon, cloves, allspice, and cumin in addition to chili powder? Find a recipe online and spice up your life.

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

References:

1. Nutrients 2016, 8, 17; doi:10.3390/nu8010017.
2. J. Nutr. 141: 1451–1457, 2011.

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