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“Flavor Meets Function”

Throughout history, herbs and spices have been treasured not only for their rarity but also for their ability to enhance flavor and mask unpleasant tastes. Today, we enjoy easy access to a wide variety of herbs and spices, which are commonly used in both cooking and health practices. Although the terms “herb” and “spice” are often used interchangeably, they refer to different parts of a plant. Herbs come from the edible, green or leafy parts, while spices are derived from other plant parts like buds, bark, roots, berries, or seeds.

For centuries, herbs and spices have played an important role in promoting health. Herbs are often used medicinally to help manage chronic and acute conditions, including cardiovascular disease, prostate issues, depression, inflammation, and to support immune health. Research shows that spices are potent sources of naturally occurring compounds that help protect cells from damage. Many of the benefits attributed to herbs and spices are related to their “anti” properties, such as antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, antibacterial, antifungal, and antiemetic effects.

Antioxidants in herbs and spices help protect the body from cell damage, reduce the risk of chronic diseases, and promote healthy aging. Anti-inflammatory compounds can help reduce inflammation in the body, which is linked to conditions like joint pain, Type 2 Diabetes, Alzheimer’s disease, and some cancers. The spice turmeric contains curcumin, which has been shown to help alleviate pain and swelling associated with certain types of arthritis. Some herbs and spices also contain antibacterial, antimicrobial, and antifungal properties, which help inhibit the growth of harmful bacteria and other substances that can spoil food. Clove, oregano, thyme, cinnamon, and cumin are especially effective in preventing foodborne spoilage. Ginger, peppermint, and chamomile are known as antiemetics, meaning they help prevent nausea and vomiting.

When cooking with herbs, the form you use affects the quantity needed. 1 tablespoon of fresh, finely chopped herbs equals 1 teaspoon of crumbled dried herbs, which equals $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon of ground herbs. When using cayenne pepper or garlic powder, start with $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon as their flavor intensifies during cooking. If doubling a recipe, do not double the herbs and spices. Increase the amount by 50 percent and add more if needed. Whole spices can stay fresh for up to 2 years, while ground spices typically retain their potency for about 6 months. Most fresh spices have a bright, rich color and strong aroma. Red spices such as paprika and red pepper can be refrigerated to help preserve their color and flavor longer.

Information comes from Kansas State University Publications.