

# Spicy Foods Offer Much More Than Heat

Analysis by [Dr. Joseph Mercola](#)

August 07, 2024

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Spices used for weight loss or weight maintenance have additional health benefits, such as anti-inflammatory properties and a pleasing flavor profile that may help limit overall calorie intake
- › Capsaicin and curcumin are examples of compounds found in spices that can help drive weight loss, as well as many other health benefits

***Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published October 16, 2017.***

Spices are a wonderful addition to foods and beverages because they can add just the right flair. Nutmeg, for instance, lends quiet warmth and complexity in desserts like apple crisp and in vegetable dishes like the savory Indian dish, saag paneer, which uses spinach. Paprika, on the other hand, lends mild sweetness to meat dishes and goulash.

But flavor is just one trait that makes spices such an integral part of cooking and eating. They can also be incredibly good for your health and help you reach your weight goals. One of the great things about adding spices of any kind to your meals is that the flavor can help you feel more satisfied, so you don't feel so deprived when you eat foods with fewer calories, says Jaclyn London, M.S., R.D., former senior clinical dietitian at Mount Sinai Hospital.<sup>1</sup>

London adds that in regard to spices, "The key is that all the ones we talk about for weight loss or maintenance have anti-inflammatory properties and a flavor profile that

may help limit overall calorie intake." With that, below are several examples of spices to try in your quest to lose weight.

## Warming Spices to Narrow Your Waistline

- **Cinnamon** — While cinnamon is delicious and warming, it also kicks in your metabolism. Studies<sup>2</sup> show it helps reduce blood glucose levels and improve insulin resistance for people with Type 2 diabetes. In fact, one study<sup>3</sup> published in Diabetes Care concluded:

*"[C]innamon reduced serum glucose [and] triglyceride ... levels in people with Type 2 diabetes. Because cinnamon would not contribute to caloric intake, [people with] Type 2 diabetes or elevated glucose [or] triglyceride ... may benefit from the regular inclusion of cinnamon in their daily diet."*

However, nutritionist and author Marilyn Glenville, Ph.D., the former president of the Food and Health Forum at The Royal Society of Medicine in the U.K., warns that people with bleeding disorders or anyone taking blood thinners, such as warfarin or heparin, should avoid cinnamon, as it contains the blood-thinning compound coumarin.<sup>4</sup>

- **Ginger** — There's a popular legend that Confucius ate ginger at every meal. One reason why may be explained in a study<sup>5</sup> reported by the European Journal of Gastroenterology and Hematology, which explored the effects of ginger on **gastric motility**, aka how quickly food moved through the colon instead of sticking around and causing problems.

The study involved 11 patients, some of whom were given placebos, and concluded with the statement that **ginger** encouraged more antral contractions, which conceivably promoted more rapid gastric emptying.<sup>6</sup> It also boosts insulin sensitivity, which London explains is due to ginger's anti-inflammatory properties, reducing fatty acids and promoting weight stability.

- **Cardamom** — Referred to as the “queen of spices” in India and Nepal, cardamom is one of the most expensive spices, yet it's still a very popular ingredient in [tea](#) and many other dishes. It's related to cinnamon and is shown in studies to help lower blood glucose levels and regulate your insulin, as well as optimize your cholesterol levels.<sup>7</sup>

Studies say this little-known spice, a thermogenic herb, has dozens of other valuable health benefits and uses, besides being antimicrobial and anti-inflammatory, which can soothe your gastrointestinal system and enhance your metabolic function.<sup>8</sup>

Cardamom is regarded as a diuretic in Ayurvedic tradition as well. One study compared it favorably with<sup>9</sup> commercial products designed to relieve weight retention, colic, diarrhea and constipation.<sup>10</sup> It's also been noted for [balancing gut flora](#) to optimize digestion.<sup>11</sup>

## Spicy Foods Offer Much More Than Heat

- **Chili powder** — The active ingredient in chili powder is capsaicin. London calls chili powder a "triple threat" because as it boosts your energy, it can help you eat slower.

Additionally, a sprinkle of chili powder on your food may inspire you to eat more healthy plant-based offerings that extra servings of refined carbs or processed foods. All three advantages relate to eating less, which may be what you're hoping for. Capsaicin also stimulates brown fat, a type of fat that generates heat by helping you burn calories, which is why it's being explored as a tool for weight loss, healthy metabolism and more.<sup>12</sup>

- **Black pepper** — With similar effects to capsaicin, Europeans have used black pepper for thousands of years in traditional medicine to treat inflammation and digestive problems. Its effectiveness is due in part to a compound known as piperine. Daily Mail notes:<sup>13</sup>

*"Piperine has similar effects to capsaicin in chilies and is what gives black pepper its heat. It's the heat [that] helps prevent the formation of new fat cells, especially if you decide to indulge in a mouth-searing meal featuring pepper and chili."*

Animal studies have also noted that piperine's ability to inhibit new fat cells from forming, known as adipogenesis, helps reduce waist size and body fat, and optimizes cholesterol levels.<sup>14</sup>

- **Cumin** – Known for jazzing up Southwestern fare, cumin is also capable of suppressing your appetite and keeping fat cells from showing up again after weight loss.<sup>15</sup>
- **Ginseng** – Ginseng, particularly the Siberian variety, is known for speeding up your metabolism and giving you a "second wind" of energy, which may be why tea with ginseng has been a "thing" all over Asia and Europe for centuries. **Siberian ginseng** is known as an adaptogen, which Daily Mail describes as something that "works according to what your body needs."

Glenville says it provides energy when required and helps combat stress and fatigue when you are under pressure.<sup>16</sup>

- **Cayenne pepper** – **Cayenne** pepper is noted for a phenomenon known as thermogenesis, which consumes oxygen in your body and can result in weight loss. It contains capsaicin, which gives it heat but also promotes fat oxidation<sup>17</sup> and increases fat burning by as much as 16%.

Capsaicin has been shown to have the potential to promote metabolic and vascular health. Further, the same study shows it has "favorable effects" on atherosclerosis, hypertension, diabetes, obesity, nonalcoholic fatty liver disease, cardiac hypertrophy and stroke risk.<sup>18</sup>

## **Spices Further Your Weight Loss Goals in Surprising Ways**

- **Garlic powder** — Practically speaking, one reason garlic powder can help you lose weight is because its strong flavor may make you take smaller bites and also eat slower, which may prevent you from eating too much. Studies also indicate that when you eat **garlic**, your body temperature can increase, a sure sign of a revved-up metabolism. Spry Living says:<sup>19</sup>

*"Garlic is thermogenic. It makes your body generate heat, which burns calories [and] revs up an enzyme called AMP-activated protein kinase that regulates metabolism. This enzyme targets many areas of the body, including muscles and a form of fat called brown fat, which produces heat and burns off calories."*

- **Turmeric** — Practically a prerequisite for any kind of Indian curry, turmeric is a huge star in the constellation of beneficial spices. London notes that when it comes to weight loss, turmeric can differentiate fat cells by halting their formation and ability to reduce in size.<sup>20</sup> Detailing why this is important, Glenville notes:<sup>21</sup>

*"Its active ingredient is curcumin, and although the research has not shown that curcumin can actually help with weight loss, it is thought to stop the regrowth of fat after someone has lost weight. This could be helpful as many people end up putting back the weight they have lost after a diet."*

**Turmeric** also helps reduce inflammation, which can be a significant contributor to obesity and the inability to lose weight. One study<sup>22</sup> notes:

*"Curcumin is the active ingredient in turmeric. Evidence suggests curcumin may regulate lipid metabolism, which plays a central role in the development of obesity and its complications. The present review addresses the evidence and mechanisms by which curcumin may play a role in downregulating obesity and reducing the impact of associated problems."*

- **Mustard seed** — It's probably no surprise that the compound in **mustard seed** that's responsible for burning fat and enhancing your metabolism is, once again,

capsaicin. Glenville adds:<sup>23</sup>

*"Mustard is part of the cruciferous family of vegetables, which are thought to have many health benefits. Other cruciferous vegetables include cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli and Brussels sprouts."*

A study<sup>24</sup> at Oxford Polytechnic University in England found that one teaspoon of mustard seed can elevate your metabolism by 25%, a benefit that persists for several hours after consumption. This may be due to the phytochemical allyl isothiocyanates, which also deliver the flavor. Steer clear of mustard that's artificially colored neon yellow or loaded with excessive amounts of sugar, though, as its health benefits are out the window.

## Ways to Keep Weight Off Once You've Lost It

The biggest hurdle people face when they double down on a diet plan that's drastically different from what future habits can sustain is that, too often, the weight comes right back. Here are some ways to help you lose weight and also keep it off once you've reached your goal:

- The amount of **fiber in your diet** is crucial for weight loss, as it is for general health. Eat foods known for keeping food moving smoothly through your colon, such as well-cooked veggies and ripe fruits.
- **Vitamin D**, or lack thereof, derived to some extent from foods you eat and primarily via the sunshine you bask in on any given day, can have an impact on your ability to lose and maintain weight. One study<sup>25</sup> showed that for more than 4,600 women 65 years old and older, low vitamin D levels contributed to mild weight gain.<sup>26</sup>
- **Reversing insulin/leptin resistance** plays a key role in preventing obesity, metabolic disorders such as Type 2 diabetes and inflammatory diseases like rheumatoid arthritis. Trading seed oils loaded with **linoleic acid**, refined sugar and processed fructose for fresh, whole foods will help optimize your insulin and leptin levels. To

learn more about this, please see my article [“Important Information About Low Carb, Cortisol and Glucose.”](#)

- **Exercise** is crucial in the quest for weight loss, as well as shoring up sagging muscles and keeping them firm and strong. Exercise also benefits your glucose, insulin and leptin levels by optimizing insulin/leptin receptor sensitivity, subsequently helping to prevent chronic disease.

## Sources and References

---

- [Daily Health Post May 6, 2013](#)
- <sup>1</sup> [Women’s Health July 21, 2014](#)
- <sup>2</sup> [J Diabetes Sci Technol. 2010 May;4\(3\):685-693](#)
- <sup>3</sup> [Diabetes Care 2003 December;26\(12\):3215-3218](#)
- <sup>4, 13, 16, 21, 23</sup> [Daily Mail June 2, 2015](#)
- <sup>5</sup> [Eur J Gastroenterol Hepatol. 2008 May;20\(5\):436-40](#)
- <sup>6</sup> [World J Gastroenterol. 2011 January; 17\(1\):105-110](#)
- <sup>7</sup> [Nutrients. 2022 Jul;14\(13\):2773](#)
- <sup>8</sup> [Endocrine Society April 3, 2016](#)
- <sup>9, 10</sup> [J Ethnopharmacol 2008 February 12; 115\(3\):463-72](#)
- <sup>11</sup> [Indian J Pharm Sci. 2010 September; 72\(5\):657-9](#)
- <sup>12</sup> [Open Heart. 2015 Jun 17;2\(1\):e000262](#)
- <sup>14</sup> [Journal of Functional Foods. Volume 71, August 2020, 104011](#)
- <sup>15</sup> [Iran Red Crescent Med J. 2016 Aug;18\(8\):e34212](#)
- <sup>17</sup> [PLoS One. 2013;8\(7\):e67786](#)
- <sup>18</sup> [Open Heart. 2015;2\(1\):e000262](#)
- <sup>19</sup> [Spry Living January 11, 2012 \(Archived\)](#)
- <sup>20</sup> [Annu Rev Nutr. 2010 August 21;30:173-199](#)
- <sup>22</sup> [Nutr Rev. 2010 December; 68\(12\):729-38](#)
- <sup>24</sup> [Huffpost, December 6, 2017](#)
- <sup>25</sup> [Science Daily, June 25, 2012](#)
- <sup>26</sup> [J Womens Health \(Larchmt\). 2012 Oct;21\(10\):1066-73](#)