

# Are Bay Leaves Good for You?

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › When you use bay leaves in your cooking, the suggestion of depth may not be identified at first tasting, but they lend subtle warmth and piquancy that would leave a dish flat without it
- › Bay leaves, usually left whole, should be removed to avoid anyone experiencing the unpleasant feel of their texture, and the fact that swallowing the pointy leaves may cause damage going down
- › Bay leaves are an excellent source of many vitamins and minerals, including vitamins A and C, and the minerals iron, manganese, copper and calcium, all antioxidant with free radical-scavenging abilities
- › An astonishing array of oils in bay leaves contain not just flavor, but potent compounds that can alleviate gastrointestinal and respiratory problems, inhibit cancer cell growth, lower blood sugar and fight inflammation

***Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published May 29, 2017.***

You've probably seen cooking shows or read cookbooks that recommended removing the bay leaves you added to your spaghetti sauce or other savory dish. But why put them in if you're just going to take them out? One enterprising chef said if you really want an answer to that question, throw a couple into a pot of water to simmer for a while, then taste it, and it will emit a fairly heady essence of camphor. Serious Eats continues:

*"Taste it after five minutes and you'll probably get a good hit of menthol and eucalyptus (think: Vick's VapoRub). That's the chemical eugenol you're smelling, and it's the biggest constituent in the bay leaf's flavor arsenal of more than 50 compounds."*<sup>1</sup>

But after an hour or so of "steeping" a bay leaf or two in your recipe, the mucus-loosening menthol notes dissipate into something softer and more complex. The suggestion of depth may not be identified at first tasting, but bay leaves lend subtle warmth and piquancy that would leave a dish flat without it.

Not to give away some of the mystery of this ancient Mediterranean plant or shrub, but like many of the culinary herbal additions used for thousands of years, antibacterial bay leaves have unique and potent gastrointestinal, respiratory, anti-inflammatory, heart and stress benefits, with anticancer and **diabetes preventive** qualities thrown in, and more.

So why take them out before serving them? In short, if you've ever taken a bite of bay leaf, you know its removal becomes necessary immediately, which isn't always pretty. The texture feels like a dropout from a silk bouquet or a stiff piece of vellum. In short, not pleasant.

Bay leaves are kept whole for the simple reason that crumbling them will take that much longer to fish those bits out of your pot of soup than plucking out whole leaves. They're removed to avoid anyone experiencing the aforementioned unpleasantness, and because of the fact that swallowing the pointy leaves might not feel so good going down.

## **So What Are Some of the '50 Compounds' in Bay Leaves?**

Bay leaves are an excellent source of many vitamins and minerals, including vitamins A and vitamin C, the minerals iron, manganese, copper and calcium, all antioxidants with free radical-scavenging abilities, positively impacting your eyesight, bones and blood.

While you certainly wouldn't use 100 grams of bay leaves in one day, showing the nutrients 100 grams contain gives you a pretty good idea of the high concentration a

few leaves might have. Here are the most important nutrients and the percentage 100 grams provides, from Nutrition and You:<sup>2</sup>

- **Iron** – 537% – helps fight anemia
- **Manganese** – 355% – helps support thyroid function
- **Vitamin A** – 206% – good for your eyes
- **Vitamin C** – 77.5% – "probably the most potent antibacterial and antiviral agent ever discovered"<sup>3</sup>
- **Calcium** – 83% – supports strong bones and teeth

There's also an impressive 133% of pyroxidine, or vitamin B6, important for being able to make use of the energy the foods you eat provide, for red blood cell production, and proper nerve function. Additionally, high zinc content offers immune support.

As you may have surmised, they're also rich in essential oils. Nature Word lists several of the most prominent, like eugenol, which has analgesic, anti-inflammatory and anticancer properties, particularly lethal to several types of colon cancer cells. There are quite a few of these essential oils:

**Cineol**, the main bay leaf component, found to slow leukemia cell growth<sup>4</sup>

**Geranyl acetate**

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**Neral**

**Myrcene** – Anti-inflammatory and analgesic; has mild sedative effects for stress relief

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**Alpha-pinene**, opens upper respiratory airways,<sup>5</sup> and may reduce tumor size as an anticancer agent<sup>6</sup>

**Linalool**, also found in hemp, has mild sedative effects for stress relief

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**Methyl chavicol**

**Limonene** works against brain cancer cells

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**Beta-pinene** – Inhibits growth of potentially infectious endocarditis<sup>7</sup>

**Alpha-terpineol**

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## **Clinical Studies on How Bay Leaves May Help Your Body**

Laurosides are another compound that, when extracted from bay leaves, has been shown to inhibit the proliferation of skin cancer cells by bringing on programmed cell death, or apoptosis.<sup>8</sup> The study succinctly states, "Induction of apoptosis by (laurosides) in human aggressive melanoma cell lines has a potential high biological value."

You've no doubt heard how lethal or at least intensely uncomfortable *Escherichia coli* (*E. coli*) can be, as well as *Salmonella* infection. A study at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University examined both the antioxidant and **antimicrobial activities** of several essential oils for their effectiveness.

The oils tested included white wormwood, rose-scented geranium and bay laurel, which was applied to fresh produce against *Salmonella* and *E. coli*. While all three essential oils showed antioxidant properties, the most potent activity took place with the bay laurel essential oil.<sup>9</sup>

One study showed that consuming 1 to 3 grams of bay leaves per day for 30 days "decreases risk factors for diabetes and cardiovascular diseases and suggests that bay leaves may be beneficial for people with Type 2 diabetes," with a positive effect on lowering blood sugar levels and improving insulin function.

The study involved 40 people with Type 2 diabetes; half given bay leaf and the other half a placebo for 30 days. At the end of the study, the placebo group had no improvement, while the herb group showed both decreased heart and diabetes risk factors.<sup>10</sup> Another review notes the antifungal properties in bay leaves, published in the *Archives of Oral Biology*, which demonstrate its effectiveness against *Candida*:

*"In the study, the bay laurel disrupted adhesion of Candida to cell walls, therefore reducing its ability to penetrate the membrane, making it a great*

*addition to a Candida diet in order to combat this condition."*<sup>11</sup>

## **More Benefits of Bay Leaves**

Even traditional medicine recommends using bay leaves for digestive issues such as ulcer pain, **heartburn**, gas and colic, as well as pain from arthritis and other muscle relief. Not just consuming essence of bay leaf is advised, but a poultice or liniment containing the essential oils is said to provide a double whammy of relief.

Heart benefits from bay leaves stem from organic compounds caffeic acid, which helps get rid of "bad" cholesterol, and rutin, which strengthens the walls of capillaries in the heart and throughout your body. Regarding **digestive health**, properties in bay leaves are good for inducing vomiting in case someone has eaten something they need to get rid of. They can also promote urination, which is another way to release toxins.<sup>12</sup>

Bay leaves also contain enzymes that can soothe an upset stomach and even **irritable bowel syndrome**, according to wellness physician Dr. Josh Axe, as well as helping to optimize nutrient absorption.<sup>13</sup> Nutrition and You relates another benefit that comes from folate in bay leaves:

*"Fresh leaves and herb parts are superb in folic acid; contain about 180 mg or 45% of daily-recommended values per 100 g. Folates are important in DNA synthesis, and when given during the peri-conception period, they can help prevent neural tube defects in the newborn baby."*<sup>14</sup>

## **How to Use Bay Leaves, and Other Notes**

It's important to know that when you buy bay leaves with the scientific term *Laurus nobilis*, you want it to be the genuine article and not some knock-off from an ornamental plant. They must be from the laurel tree, so shop for quality. While some herbs, when dried, become powdery and tasteless, bay leaves can be dried with very little change in the aromatic components. In fact, Nature Word notes that:

*"Fresh bay leaves have a mild, leafy fragrance and a bitter taste. Dried ones are significantly more fragrant (the essential oils having had time to set), but slightly sweeter in taste."<sup>15</sup>*

Dried leaves of bay can be steeped in a tea to gain some of the aforementioned benefits. It's also a classic ingredient in several savory sauces, usually with a tomato base, and delicious on seafood, meats and numerous vegetable dishes.

One FYI: Due to the presence of a high concentration of eugenol, bay leaf oil (or bay oil) may be a skin and mucous membrane irritant. It also should be avoided during pregnancy. If you want your bay leaves to last and last, store them in the freezer, which is helpful if you want to buy them in bulk.

## Sources and References

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- <sup>1</sup> [Serious Eats 2017](#)
- <sup>2, 14</sup> [Nutrition and You 2009-2017](#)
- <sup>3, 15</sup> [Nature Word July 19, 2020](#)
- <sup>4</sup> [Oncol Rep. 2002 July-August; 9\(4\):757-60](#)
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- <sup>6</sup> [Biologia October 2013; Volume 68, Issue 5, pp 1004-1009](#)
- <sup>7</sup> [Brazilian Journal of Pharmaceutical Sciences, Vol. 43, January-March 2007](#)
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- <sup>10</sup> [J Clin Biochem Nutr. 2009 January;44\(1\):52-56](#)
- <sup>11</sup> [Arch Oral Biol. 2017 January;73:179-185](#)
- <sup>12</sup> [Organic Facts 2017](#)
- <sup>13</sup> [Quora June 22, 2016](#)