

# Turmeric: Powerful Through the Ages

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Ever think about why the mustard found on American grocery store shelves is bright yellow? The color comes not from mustard seeds, but from a spice called turmeric, the same ingredient that gives Indian curries as well as some cheeses their distinctive sunny hue.

Turmeric (*Cucurma longa*), with its warm, slightly bitter taste, is actually a relative of ginger and has been used for both food and medicine for an astounding 4000 years. But curcumin, the active component in turmeric, was not discovered until 1910.

## Ancient Medicinal Properties

This ancient spice's medicinal properties seem to revolve around its anti-inflammatory properties and there is growing evidence for beneficial effects across a wide variety of diseases, including digestive problems, skin disorders and wounds. Studies suggest that turmeric's effects may also be effective in treating infection as well as some cancers.

## A Potent Antioxidant

In addition to its powerful anti-inflammatory properties, turmeric is also a potent antioxidant that fights free radicals, molecules in the body which can damage cell membranes, interfere with DNA and in some cases, actually cause cell death.

There has been a staggering amount of research conducted on this lowly spice. As of April, 2015, there are over 8000 studies on either curcumin or turmeric listed in the National Institutes of Health PubMed database, with many of these studies directly focused on curcumin's many benefits to human health.

## And NOW... Researching Turmeric's Effects on Alzheimer's Patients

Researchers at Vanderbilt University are currently studying turmeric's effect on Alzheimer's patients. Protein fragments, known as beta-amyloid, accumulate in the brains of people suffering from this progressive and deadly neurological disorder, forming dense plaques that irreversibly destroy the brain's cells, the neurons.

A recent study published in the journal *Stem Cell Research & Therapy*, has already demonstrated an association with turmeric extract and the growth of stem cells in the brains of live rats. Results such as these may well lead to treatments, not only for Alzheimer's, but to other neurodegenerative diseases as well.

## Here's How to Choose a Turmeric Supplement

While turmeric powder is easily available at your local market and can be incorporated into most people's diets in the form of curries or the chopped, fresh root added to smoothies or cooked vegetable dishes, actually getting enough of turmeric's active ingredient into your bloodstream remains a problem. Turmeric is not easily absorbed by the body, but according to research, adding a little black pepper or even fat such as olive or coconut oil when taking it could help with its absorption.

Another option would be to purchase a supplement, but as in choosing all supplements, caution is advised. Be careful to obtain a high-quality product that contains adequate levels of curcumin. Also be certain that your choice of a turmeric supplement contains black pepper extract or piperine.

## Are There Side Effects?

Turmeric, either in the diet or as a supplement, seems to be well tolerated by most people, although if you have problems with gallstones or any liver or gallbladder problems, you should avoid it. As always, get your health care provider's approval prior to beginning any dietary change or supplement if you are pregnant.

So is it time to spice up *your* life by adding turmeric to your diet or supplement routine? With centuries of use as food and medicine, and a growing body of research, it seems turmeric has earned a well-deserved place in both your kitchen and your medicine cabinet!