

Turmeric: Powerful Through the Ages

Did you know the ingredient that is responsible for the bright yellow color of American mustard, the distinctive golden hue of Indian curry and the bright orange color of some cheeses is actually turmeric, a relative of ginger that has been used for both food as well as medicine for an astounding 4000 years?

Antioxidant Properties

Turmeric (*Cucurma longa*), with its warm, slightly bitter taste, is a potent antioxidant that has been demonstrated to destroy free radicals. In addition to its antioxidant powers, 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.

Curcumin, the active component in turmeric, was not discovered until 1910 and since that time 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.

Neurodegenerative Disease Research

Researchers at Vanderbilt University are currently studying turmeric's effect on the beta-amyloid plaques that accumulate in the brains of Alzheimer's patients, using a specially fabricated inhalable curcumin molecule that is actually able to penetrate the blood-brain barrier.

A 2014 study from the German Institute of Neuroscience and Medicine 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.

Absorption

While turmeric powder is easily available in local markets 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 the 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.

Turmeric, either in the diet or as a supplement, seems to be well tolerated by most people, although patients with gallstones or bile duct dysfunction should avoid it. As always, use caution when recommending any supplement to women who are pregnant.

Advise Your Patients

Advise your patients to obtain a high-quality product that contains adequate levels of curcumin. Also be certain their choice of a turmeric supplement contains black pepper extract or piperine to increase bioavailability.

Can Turmeric Benefit Your Medical Practice?

So is it time to spice up your medical practice by advising your patients to add turmeric to their diet or to their supplement regimen? With centuries of use as food and medicine, and a growing body of scientific research, it seems turmeric has earned a well-deserved place in your medical arsenal!

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