

## PENNY SAVER NEWS

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### Spicy Health

How often do you pull a jar off the spice shelf and think “Here goes a little more health!”? Do you add cinnamon to your oatmeal, or oregano to the spaghetti sauce just to make them better for you? Not usually! Most of us add spices and herbs because we like the flavor they add. But maybe in the future we’ll be adding this one to protect our hearts, or that one to ward off cancer!

Herbs and spices come from plants. Some are seeds, some are stems, or leaves, roots, bark or flower buds. Just about any part of a plant could show up in a bottle in your cupboard. Fruits and vegetables have a huge variety of colors, flavors and aromas. That’s part of why we like them so much. Herbs and spices are parts that have the most concentrated flavor or aroma. So it makes sense that herbs and spices could also have the phytonutrients that fruits and vegetables have, or more.

There are many types of phytonutrients. Some are colors. For example, the lutein that seems to be so helpful supporting our vision and maybe our memory is one of the red pigments. Red fruits such as tomatoes, watermelon, even strawberries, are good sources of that particular phytonutrient.

But since we don’t usually use enough of a spice to color the whole dish pigments are not usually the active ingredient. Instead most spices and herbs are particularly good sources of antioxidants mainly because of a lot of the chemicals that give spices their strong flavors. Cinnamon, rosemary, oregano, bright yellow

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turmeric, curry powder, ginger and thyme all have significant amounts of antioxidants. Ground cinnamon has more antioxidant power in 1 teaspoon than there is in a whole cup of pomegranate juice, or half a cup of blueberries. That's pretty powerful!

Antioxidant power is generally thought to be helpful because it helps prevent damage to our DNA and fat. Antioxidants help our immune system work better too. That means less cancer, less atherosclerosis and other illnesses.

Should we buy the little bottles, or would we get more healthy help by buying the packets of fresh herbs? We're probably better off getting the dried herbs. For one thing, they're not going to mold or wilt like the fresh ones. We can keep the dried ones on hand, ready to add a pinch of this and a touch of that whenever we're cooking. And many spices need some kind of treatment to prepare them for use.

Another reason to go for the dried kinds is that, without all the water of the fresh plant, the dried ones are actually more concentrated. So there's more active ingredient in each teaspoonful you use. Not every spice and herb has been checked yet, but so far it looks like most of them keep their power when they're dry.

The problem is that, while there is evidence that different spices and herbs can stop damage, there's very little proof that a certain amount will have a definite effect. Some of the evidence comes from test tubes, which just don't work the same way our bodies do. Sometimes the studies use concentrated extracts that we could never eat in food because they'd be too strong. Some of the evidence is just a measure by a machine, not of a food in a living creature. So don't give up on the healthy lifestyle and foods, the exercise or the medications. But adding more spices and herbs to your cooking will liven up your taste buds, and maybe add years to your life too.

Here's an easy, colorful, flavorful and definitely healthy dish for dinner tonight.

### Baked Tomato Florentine Pasta

½ pound ground turkey	½ cup chopped onion
1 - 15 oz can tomato sauce	1 - 6 oz can tomato paste
½ cup water	1 Tbsp Italian seasoning
2 tsp sugar	½ tsp ground cinnamon
½ tsp garlic powder	¼ tsp crushed red pepper
2 cups (6 oz) uncooked penne or other pasta	1 pkg -10 oz frozen chopped spinach
½ cup shredded part skim mozzarella cheese	1 ½ cups part skim ricotta cheese

Preheat oven to 375°F. Cook pasta as directed on package, drain well. Cook turkey and onion in large nonstick skillet until completely brown. Stir in tomato sauce, paste, water, sugar and spices. Bring to boil and simmer on low heat for 10 minutes, stirring once or twice. Squeeze thawed spinach to remove most of water. Stir spinach and pasta into sauce. Spread half in 11x7 inch baking pan. Spread ricotta cheese over pasta, distributing it evenly. Spread rest of pasta mixture over cheese, then sprinkle mozzarella cheese over top. Bake 15 minutes. Let stand 5 minutes before serving. Serves 6.