

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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If you're looking for a pleasant New Year's Resolution, rather than the "I will not...", try this one "I will try to cook with more spices this year." Depending on how you cook and how many spices you use now, that might be very easy. Or you might have such a line-up of spice jars on your shelves it could be difficult to find a new one to try. But, why should you use more spices?

The more we study spices the more good things, besides flavors, we find in them. A lot of spices are very good sources of antioxidants. Many of these are protectors for our cells, helping to prevent the damage that can lead to cancers or the inflammation of heart disease. Some spice ingredients seem to help protect our vision, preventing or at least slowing down the developments of glaucoma or cataracts. There are some studies that suggest some spices help protect the brain from the ravages of Alzheimer's disease.

So, which spices? How much? How often? Ah, there's the problem. A lot of the studies so far have been done in test tubes or animals. Many have used concentrated extracts of spice compounds. Some of the concentrations used have been completely unrealistic, doses that would burn our tongues and kill our sense of taste and smell for the next couple of days! Some just taste so bitter that no one would want to use them in that form. And there's always the probability that we wouldn't absorb the extracts as well as we do when we eat the whole foods.

For many spices we have no idea how much, how many teaspoons or pinches or shakes, we have to eat, over what time, to get an effective dose into our system. And some that seemed at first glance to have a lot of promise turn out to be ineffective when studied in large numbers of real people.

Cinnamon is a good example of that. Remember when cinnamon was being promoted as a way to manage blood sugar? In test tubes and lab animals it looked really good. But when real people used it in food in real diets, even after extended times, there just was no significant effect.

Ginger is one that's getting the analysis now. In test tubes ginger extracts can stop the growth of cancer cells. In a small proportion of the population it seems to help reduce symptoms of asthma, but not in most people. And it might help relieve arthritis. Will it work in a body? How much would we have to eat for it to work? Who knows? But it sure does taste good!

Of course the good thing is that spices used at normal food levels, small amounts over extended times, taste great and give our bodies continuous low doses of all these protectors. And as with fruits and vegetables, the wider range of spices and herbs we use the wider range of protection we'll be getting. If you don't use a lot of spices now, pick one or two common ones to try. Most bottles have lists on the label of what kinds of foods they're commonly used in. Or go to the library and read a couple of cookbooks to see what foods go well with those spices. Increase the amounts gradually. Too much of some can cause indigestion or nausea.

Here's a perky version of a breakfast favorite that becomes a classy dessert when spiced up. Use your favorite brand of pancake mix as a base then spice it up.

Serve these with vanilla low fat yogurt or ice cream, or with a fruit salad on top. Happy Spicy New Year!

Ginger Waffles

2 cups pancake mix

2 eggs

1 tsp vanilla extract

1 Tbsp ground ginger

1 tsp cinnamon

1 tsp grated orange peel

milk or buttermilk as called for on the package

Add spices to pancake mix, then add eggs and milk according to the package directions. Bake on waffle iron, or make as thin pancakes and serve rolled into tubes with yogurt inside. Makes 8 large waffles.

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