

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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What's Fenugreek?

Fenugreek seems to be one of the up and coming 'new miracle' foods. At least the variety of claims being made about the health properties of this ancient spice are trying to make it into a miracle. But its history as food is much longer than evidence backing the new medicinal uses.

Whether you recognized it or not, you've probably smelled fenugreek. If you've ever sniffed a jar of curry powder, or stuck your head in a spice shop, or tasted Indian curry, you've smelled or tasted fenugreek. It has a strong, almost bitter but slightly sweet flavor with some earthiness to it. Some people think it tastes like burnt maple syrup. There is enough maple-ness to it that it's used to make artificial maple flavoring. While it can be used by itself, more often the ground seeds are used in mixtures and blends, from curry powder in India and South Asia to Turkish and Armenian dishes and some traditionally Jewish foods from the Arabian Peninsula. This little seed does get around!

The range of foods seasoned by fenugreek is just as broad. Usually combined with other spices from allspice to paprika, garlic to cinnamon, fenugreek is part of many traditional mixtures. These combinations are the seasoning for dried beef, beans and lentils, pickles, soups and stews. Many ethnic dishes would not be the same, nor nearly as delicious without fenugreek. And alone, fenugreek can flavor vegetables from eggplant to potato.

All of that is great, tasty food. But now it's being sold as a supplement with claims of reducing our blood sugar, lowering our cholesterol, taking off our excess pounds and even putting an extra spark in our love lives. And of course, extra health claims mean extra prices too. So is it worth it? Will these little square seeds do it all?

A lot of these claims are based on the fact that fenugreek has lots of fiber. If you soak the seeds in hot water overnight the fiber will leach out. In the morning you'll have a jelly-like lump, seeds surrounded by the gelled fiber that leaked out. Some kinds of fiber do help keep blood sugar from spiking. Some kinds of fiber do help to pull down our cholesterol levels. And fiber helps a lot of people feel full longer, so they're less likely likely to need extra snacks. But then, some countries allow fenugreek to be sold to help people who have lost their appetite!

Test tube studies have also found that fenugreek has antioxidants, might have some anti-cancer compounds, might reduce inflammation, and maybe help relieve pain. But people are not test tubes. And the few studies that have been done with people are not agreeing. One can say that people had lower blood sugar, but another one will find that it made no difference. One little study found that fenugreek helped lower triglycerides, but had no effect on cholesterol. In another people said they felt more full, but they ate just as much as the people who did not get the fenugreek. So it doesn't seem to live up to any of its promises.

At least one group of doctors has also suggested that if fenugreek fiber is powerful enough to make a real difference in our health it could also change how our other medications work. And a lot of people know from experience that adding extra fiber to your diet is a prescription for gas and bloating. So use it for flavor, try a new recipe, but don't add it to your medicine cabinet just yet!

If you're ready to try a bit of curry powder, here's an easy way to put new zip in canned fruit. This is pretty sweet, so use fruit canned *in juice*, not heavy syrup. And if you want more spice just use more curry powder. Indian curry powder is usually hotter, and Madras curry powder is the hottest, so choose according to your family's taste.

Warm Curried Fruit

1 (14-15 oz) can each of canned peach, pear and pineapple slices, canned in juice

1/3 cup margarine

1 cup packed brown sugar

1 Tbsp curry powder

pinch of salt

Preheat oven to 350°F. Drain all fruit and combine. Spoon into 2-quart baking dish. Melt butter in small saucepan. Stir in sugar, curry powder and salt and heat until sugar dissolves. Pour over fruit. Bake for 25-30 minutes. Serve hot with a dollop of plain regular or Greek yogurt on top. Serves 8-10.

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