

OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Katie Gravesen, DC

Healthy Holiday Foods Part I: Spices, Nuts & Chocolate

The holiday season is associated with a vast array of time-honored foods, which most people consider unhealthy indulgences. However, if prepared nutritiously, many of the ingredients found in traditional seasonal fare offer surprising health benefits. Dr. Gravesen explores what ingredients and foods to embrace this holiday season. Specifically, this first part of a two-part Optimal Health University™ series focuses on spices, nuts and chocolate.

Nutmeg

Nutmeg, the seed of an Indonesian tree, has a mild, slightly sweet flavor. It is used ground or freshly grated to flavor a variety of holiday favorites.

In studies, nutmeg shows assorted health benefits. Extract of nutmeg activates an enzyme that counters metabolic disorders, such as obesity and type-2 diabetes (*Bioorg Med Chem Lett* 2010;20:4128-31).

Another investigation reveals that nutmeg produces an antidepressant-like effect in mice (*J Med Food* 2006;9:84-9). Other animal studies highlight the spice's ability to enhance memory and learning capacity.

At this time of year, most people associate nutmeg with eggnog. However, rather than serving eggnog, which is loaded with fat and sugar, offer guests hot apple cider simmered with nutmeg, cinnamon and cloves. Also, consider sprinkling nutmeg on squash before roasting.



One note: Dr. Gravesen cautions that while nutmeg is salubrious in the quantity used for culinary purposes, it can be toxic in large amounts.

Cinnamon

Who can imagine the holidays without cinnamon? This ancient spice comes from the bark of several tree species of the genus *Cinnamomum* and is referenced in ancient Greek writings and the Old Testament.

Several studies have uncovered health benefits of this popular spice. For instance, scientific evidence demonstrates that eating cinnamon lowers blood glucose and cholesterol in diabetics.

Dr. Gravesen is also interested in other investigations that show cinnamon's promise in fighting cancer (*Free Radic Biol Med* 2009;46:220-3).

Savor cinnamon's plusses by sprinkling it over wholesome baked apples or pears, adding it to stews for extra depth of flavor, or using a cinnamon stick as a tasty garnish for tea.

Cloves

The clove is another aromatic spice associated with the holiday season. This distinctive-smelling spice is actu-



ally a dried flower bud.

The potent fragrance of cloves comes from their essential oil, which scientists found to be a powerful antimicrobial, antioxidant, antifungal and antiviral agent (*Phytother Res* 2007;21:501-6).

Cloves have anti-inflammatory properties, and their oil encourages muscle regeneration (*J Cell Biochem* 2010; Epub).

The intense flavor of cloves shines in chai tea and spicy mulled cider and wine. Cloves are also traditionally used to stud baked ham and pineapple. Cloves can also be added sparingly to simmering broth or stock.

Ginger

The rhizome of the ginger plant is grated fresh or used in powdered form for cooking. Ginger gets its familiar zing from a combination of volatile oils.



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These oils give ginger a long history as a gentle natural remedy for a variety of gastrointestinal maladies.

A review of clinical trials backs up the rhizome's therapeutic reputation, as it consistently outperforms placebo for relieving nausea and vomiting (*Br J Anaesth* 2000;84:367-71).

Ginger also has powerful anti-inflammatory properties — it contains compounds that inhibit COX-2, an enzyme involved in cellular inflammation. Research connecting obesity to inflammation suggests that ginger may combat obesity and insulin resistance (*Annu Rev Nutr* 2010;30:173-9).

Enjoy ginger this winter in tea and baked goods, such as ginger cookies and ginger bread. Instead of sugar, sweeten these treats with honey or molasses.



Peppermint

Peppermint is well known for its ability to soothe an upset stomach. Scientists are uncovering more benefits of the essential oil of peppermint, which can kill *E. coli* and tumor cells, as well as reduce blood cholesterol levels (*Pharmacogn Mag* 2010;6:147-5).

According to trials on cognitive performance, the distinctive scent of peppermint enhances memory and alertness (*Int J Neurosci* 2008;118:59-77).

Peppermint plays the leading role in the iconic candy cane. However, it's important to limit consumption of candy canes, which are mostly refined sugar. Instead, add peppermint leaves to fruit salad, tabuli or lentils. Sip refreshing mint tea, or add a drop of mint extract to lightly sweetened hot chocolate.

Nuts

Nuts have unfairly garnered a bad reputation as a fat-filled snack. While they are high in fat, it is a healthy type of fat called unsaturated fatty acids. Plus, the fiber, fat and protein in nuts makes them satiating — even in small amounts. These holiday party staples pack a lot of nutrition between their shells.

Scientific studies show that eating nuts regularly lowers LDL cholesterol (“bad” cholesterol) by up to 19 percent (*Br J Nutr* 2006;96:S68-78).

Research also correlates consumption of nuts and nut butters with a lower risk of death from cardiovascular and coronary heart diseases (*Br J Nutr* 2006;96:S52-60).

Nuts are also an abundant source of antioxidants. This is particularly true of holiday favorites such as chestnuts, pecans, hazelnuts and walnuts.

Whether in a stuffing, garnishing a salad, or simply by the handful, nuts are a delicious and satisfying way to maintain optimal health over the holidays. Just make sure to choose unflavored nuts, free of salt, preservatives and chemical flavorings. The name of the nut should be the only ingredient on the package.

Chocolate

Chocolate, that king of all sweets, is abundant during the holidays. And, dark chocolate's high antioxidant content makes it a treat for your health as well as your palate.

Cocoa is bursting with flavanols. These heart-healthy antioxidants enhance blood circulation, increasing blood flow to the brain and boosting mental functionality and alertness. Researchers recently found that a diet rich in flavanols increased cognitive test scores in a group of elderly participants (*J Nutr* 2009;139:120-7).

Research also indicates that flavanols in chocolate may offer powerful anti-depressive and anti-anxiety benefits. Another antioxidant compound found in chocolate, resveratrol, staved off

and decreased the severity of neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's disease in animal tests (*Neurochem Int* 2009;54:111-18).

Furthermore, mice fed diets high in resveratrol in another study had longer lifespans (*Nutr Rev* 2008;66:591-6).

For maximum health benefits, celebrate the holidays with dark chocolate, which contains higher levels of cocoa and less sugar compared to milk chocolate. Specifically, look for chocolate containing at least 65 percent cocoa.

Consider making hot cocoa from scratch, so that you may limit the amount of sugar used. Many health food stores stock powdered dark chocolate, which is perfect for homemade hot chocolate. Chocolate fondue is another holiday favorite. Prepare a healthier version by melting dark chocolate chips with organic cream. For dipping, choose an array of antioxidant rich fruits, such as oranges, pineapple, banana, strawberries and apples.

Give Yourself the Gift of Health

The chiropractic lifestyle encompasses more than spinal adjustments — it emphasizes the value of whole foods to enhance wellness all year long. As you can see, many holiday favorites can help build and maintain vibrant health into the New Year.

Learn more about chiropractic's revolutionary holistic approach to health and well-being. Give yourself the gift of total wellness — make an appointment with our office today for a consultation.

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