Since biblical times, cinnamon has been revered as an ingredient in Roman love potions and perfumes, a popular food additive, and a status symbol. It has been touted as a cure for coughs and indigestion, an impressive source of antioxidants, and a reliable enhancer of insulin activity.

Cinnamon comes from the inner bark of a tree, which predominantly grows in India, China, and Sri Lanka. Cinnamon sticks are formed when the inner rind is dried and rolled. Cinnamon oil comes from boiling the fruit and coarser pieces of bark. Two main varieties are used in bottled spice products: Ceylon cinnamon (Cinnamomum zeylanicum) and cassia, or Chinese cinnamon (Cinnamomum cassia).

Spice Up Your Health

Cinnamon contains unique volatile substances that provide anti-clotting actions, protect against heart disease, and boost brain function and alertness.

Scientists have also learned that cinnamon offers strong antioxidant activity. In a study designed to measure antioxidant levels, ground cinnamon had the second highest antioxidant capacity, second only to cloves out of 16 seasonings. In other words, cinnamon is the spice of choice for quenching free radicals that lead to disease and aging.

Here's a look at the most recent findings on cinnamon and health:

- **Diabetes and Cardiovascular disease.** Cinnamon consumption may positively impact individuals with diabetes, and decrease the risk of heart disease. USDA researcher Richard A. Anderson, PhD, says ingesting cinnamon provides insulin sensitivity. When taken twice daily before meals, 1/2 tsp. of cinnamon decreased glucose, cholesterol and triglyceride levels by 10-30 percent. Cinnamon reduced blood pressure in rats when ingested in an extract form.

- **Stimulant effect.** A whiff of cinnamon may help you stay alert behind the wheel. Bryan Raudenbush, PhD, director of undergraduate research at Wheeling Jesuit University and associate professor of psychology, and several student researchers, found that the scent of cinnamon, when administered with oxygen, reduced frustration and fatigue while driving.

- **Colds and flu.** Cinnamon has long been valued in traditional Chinese medicine for its warming qualities. It has been used to provide relief when faced with the onset of a cold or flu, especially when mixed in tea with fresh ginger.

Sprinkle It On or Supplement

Cinnamon comes ground, in sticks, as an oil and in supplement form (capsules or extract). Compared to ground, stick cinnamon has a longer shelf life, while Ceylon cinnamon is slightly sweeter and is thought to have a richer, more complex flavor (although it can be more difficult to find). The medicinal compounds are the same in both varieties of cinnamon.

Ingestion of ground cinnamon can be mildly irritating to the stomach initially. To avoid this, start with 1/4 tsp. twice daily and gradually increase the amount up to 1/2 tsp. twice daily. For supplements, follow label instructions or consult your doctor. Eating or drinking cinnamon is not thought to cause hypoglycemia, so both diabetics and nondiabetics can enjoy safely.