curcumin
curry's secret agent

BEHIND ALL GREAT SPICES ARE POWERFUL HEALING COMPOUNDS. FOR THE CURRY SEASONING TURMERIC, THAT HIDDEN GEM IS CURCUMIN—A POTENT ANTIOXIDANT THAT QUELLS INFLAMMATION AND KEEPS THE MIND SHARP

By Jack Challem

Curcumin is a potent antioxidant and anti-inflammatory with potentially far-reaching health benefits. Based on human, animal, and cell studies, it may be helpful in rheumatoid arthritis, inflammatory bowel disease, pancreatitis, Alzheimer's disease, heart disease, diabetic retinopathy, and cancer. All of these diseases share underlying inflammation that curcumin can diminish.

ALIAS: If you have ever eaten curry or cooked with the spice turmeric (which gives curry its yellowish color), you've consumed curcumin. Curry uses turmeric, obtained from the roots of Curcuma longa. Curcumin, consisting of several curcuminoids, is the active constituent of turmeric. Biologically, turmeric is related to ginger.

HOW IT WORKS:
Curcumin works through several well-established mechanisms. An antioxidant in its own right, it also boosts levels of glutathione S-transferase, one of the body's principal antioxidants. It blocks the formation of prostaglandin E2 (PGE2), a compound that promotes inflammation within the body.

To get technical for a moment: Curcumin also inhibits activity of "nuclear factor kappa beta," another substance involved in inflammation. In addition, it reduces the activity of cyclooxygenase-2 (COX-2) and 5-lipoxygenase (5-LOX), two more inflammation-promoting enzymes. Finally, curcumin prevents mutations to DNA, in effect helping to maintain younger, healthier cells.

HEALTH BENEFITS: Supplemental curcumin can help with the following conditions and diseases:
• Rheumatoid arthritis. In a study conducted at the University of Arizona Health Sciences Center in Tucson, researchers used a curcumin-rich turmeric extract to treat rheumatoid arthritis in laboratory animals. The extract blocked joint inflammation and the breakdown of joint cartilage and bone. It worked by inhibiting genes involved in inflammation.
• Cancer. Curcumin holds tremendous promise in preventing cancer and as an adjunct treatment. Animal studies show that curcumin can protect against colon, intestinal, oral, and skin cancers. Its benefits derive from several mechanisms. First, it blocks the cell-growth cycle (a process called apoptosis) in cancer cells, leading to cell
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3.6 g (3,600 mg) of curcumin reduced PGE2 levels by two-thirds in just one hour. After one month of daily consumption, PGE2 levels were 57 percent lower than before supplementation began.

BACKGROUND CHECK: Turmeric, the source of curcumin, has been used as a culinary spice for at least 2,000 years. It was listed in an Assyrian herbal in 600 BC, used by ancient Greeks, and widely recommended in Ayurvedic medicine. It is native to India and other regions of South Asia.

GLEANINGS: Eating a lot of curry—rich in curcumin—may reduce the risk of Alzheimer’s disease and help maintain mental function. In a study published in the American Journal of Epidemiology, researchers reported that people who often ate curry had half the risk of becoming mentally impaired. Eating curry on occasion reduced the risk of mental decline by a little more than one third.

HEADS UP: Curcumin is safe in amounts from 500 to 8,000 mg daily.

WHAT YOU SHOULD TAKE: Most supplements provide 500 mg of curcumin. Turmeric is safe in even larger amounts, but is usually limited by taste as a spice. Look for a standardized supplement containing at least 90 percent curcumin. Use curry spice to flavor homemade chicken salad.

CURCUMIN/TURMERIC PRODUCTS FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: TURMERIC POWDER BY DR. ANDREW WEIL FOR TEA AND ITO EN; BEST CURCUMIN WITH BIOPERINE FROM DOCTOR’S BEST; NEW CHAPTER’S TURMERIC FORCE; AND NATURE’S ANSWER ANTIOXIDANT SUPREME (WITH TURMERIC).