Herb profile

Cayenne

The best cardiovascular herb available

This safe culinary spice has proven to be exceptionally good for circulation.

Terry Willard, CIH, PhD

Health claims
Cayenne (*Capsicum sp.*) lowers blood pressure, blood cholesterol, triglycerides, and LDL/HDL ratio, while strengthening the heart. It reduces blood clots, dilates capillaries, has anti-inflammatory properties, and is a great pain reliever.

How it works
Cayenne, the fiery orange-red herb that puts a zing in our food, is known to be a very strong local stimulant in the circulatory system. Capsaicin, the major constituent of cayenne, has been shown to significantly lower both plasma cholesterol and triglycerides, but even more important, lower the LDL/HDL (bad cholesterol to good cholesterol) ratio. These effects may be due to decreased intestinal absorption of lipids (fatty substances in our blood and tissues).

Cayenne significantly reduces liver cholesterol levels while enhancing bile flow and the subsequent elimination of cholesterol via the bowels. Capsaicin has also been shown to decrease platelet aggregation, thus reducing blood clots and strokes. Cayenne’s mechanism for thinning the blood is different than aspirin’s.

Substance P is one of our body’s key neural peptides, responsible for several types of pain, and especially associated with inflammation and allergies. Its production by cayenne dilates the arteries, thereby helping to lower blood pressure. Substance P stimulation
makes capsaicin a very strong topical pain reliever, especially when applied to herpes zoster (shingles). Internally, it can regulate nerve response and works as a cardiac tonic. The extensive research on capsaicin indicates an effect on bronchiole function (affecting allergies and pain) and cardiac function. There is even some speculation that capsaicin might have some anticarcinogenic properties.

As a liniment on sore muscles, cayenne is an antispasmodic. It can be used to release muscle spasms especially in shoulder, arm, and spine. It can also be used for overworked muscles, rheumatism, arthritis, frostbite, and chronic lumbago.

How to take cayenne
Cayenne can simply be added to your diet—one-half teaspoon, twice daily with food is recommended. In capsule form, I suggest taking one during each of two meals daily. For those who prefer tinctures, try five to 10 drops twice daily. It is always best to take cayenne during a meal, as it can be quite shocking if consumed on an empty stomach.

Caveats
This herb is completely safe. It has been used as a culinary spice for millennia. A small number of people get rectal burning when initially taking cayenne. This usually goes away after a few days of consumption. Some practitioners feel that since it is a member of the Solanaceae family (peppers), its use internally is contraindicated in conditions of rheumatism and arthritis. I find this to seldom be a problem for my patients.

Terry Willard, CIH, PhD, is a practitioner, teacher, and director of the Wild Rose College of Natural Healing in Calgary, Alberta. His most recent book is Mind-Body Harmony (Key Porter Books, 2003).