Cayenne, the spicy pepper in the same family as bell peppers and jalapeños, not only puts the kick into many spicy dishes, it also lends a hand toward better health.

Cayenne creams contain the active compound capsaicin, which has been shown to ease the pain of arthritic joints, as well as discomfort from shingles, muscular aches and spasms, bursitis, diabetic neuropathy, and phantom pains following amputation. Rubbing capsaicin on the skin depletes the body of chemical messengers that would otherwise send pain signals. So even though a source of pain remains, you won't feel it as much while using capsaicin. This effect won't last, so you have to keep applying the cream to deplete those messengers. Start applying it four times a day for four days then cut back to twice daily (creams providing from 0.025–0.075 percent capsaicin are readily available in stores).

Cayenne creams let you know they are working: there's a definite tingle, or even sting, when you first apply them. Be sure not to put this potent stuff on broken or irritated skin. And wash your hands after using so you don't accidentally transfer any of the cream to your eyes or other sensitive areas.

Consuming cayenne in foods or as a capsule can ease the pain of a stomachache, cramps, gas, or indigestion, and may benefit the cardiovascular system by lowering LDL cholesterol and protecting from free radical damage. There's even promising research in terms of cayenne and weight control, since the sizzle in cayenne cranks up thermogenesis (the burning of calories) and can also rein in appetite. "This means that while your mouth is burning, so are extra calories," says Kim Dalzell, PhD, RD, a Round Lake, Ill.-based holistic nutritionist. This spicy herb may also protect the stomach lining from the damaging effects of aspirin. If you have an ulcer or gastritis, however, use cayenne cautiously, as it could worsen those conditions.

Looking for a great way to cleanse your system? An effective detox drink can be made from cayenne, suggests Maoshing Ni, PhD, herbalist and cofounder of Yo San University of Traditional Chinese Medicine in Los Angeles. "Simply squeeze the juice of 1 lemon into a pint of warm water; add a pinch of cayenne and 1 tablespoon of maple syrup," Maoshing says. Drink one or more cups daily.

If you're choosing mostly raw fruits and veggies during a cleansing diet, you might notice that the raw foods can be tough to digest, points out Maureen Whitehouse, author of Soul-Full Eating: A (Delicious!) Path to Higher Consciousness. "Many people find that when their digestive fire is weak, the raw roughage is not necessarily easy to digest. Sprinkle a little cayenne on your foods until you build up this kind of inner fire."