



## The Power of Spices

Herbalists have used plant remedies for centuries, but only recently have scientists begun to study the powers of common herbs and spices. Spices have a very low calorie content and are relatively inexpensive. They are reliable sources of antioxidants and scientific studies suggest that they are also potent inhibitors of tissue damage and inflammation caused by high levels of blood sugar. (R. Vasanthi and P. Parameswari, 2010)

This list below outlines the role of some spices used in the Indian kitchen for its flavour, taste and possible medicinal benefits.

Cardamom इलायची



Among all Indian spices, cardamom is one of the most expensive spices in the world. It is expensive as its harvesting takes a lot of manual labour and is hand-harvested. It belongs originally to the Malabar coast but is now grown in some other places. Black cardamom is smoky and spicy while the green variant has a subtle eucalyptus taste to it. Cardamom is generally used for its flavour in Indian desserts and tea.

Clove लौंग



Clove is a common spice in Indian cooking and its anise notes are easily recognizable in many Indian preparations. The strong, almost medicinal flavor of clove comes from the concentration of essential oils. Cloves are technically flowers, and a lot of their oils are pressed out before they are dried and used in cooking.

Black pepper काली मर्चि



Black pepper is actually native to India, primarily from the Western Ghats and Malabar region. It is a surprisingly hard spice to grow, as it depends on many natural cycles, like a set amount of rainfall, which is why prices for fresh pepper vary a lot.

Cumin जीरा



Cumin is one of the most commonly used Indian spices. This masala is added to curries, dal, vegetables and much more. It is added for its strong aroma and taste. Cumin is often the first spice added while cooking many Indian dishes. Cumin belongs to the parsley family – yes, the same parsley that is used in various Italian dishes. Cumin is roasted dry before usage. Roasted cumin is also used in the powdered form. Use cumin sparingly as its taste can be overpowering.

Coriander धनिया



This is another common spice that you will find in all Indian kitchens. Coriander is one of the oldest spices in the world. In India, it is grown in a few parts of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. Its subtle citrusy flavour and sweet, tangy taste make it special. Coriander also belongs to the parsley family and is used as an alternative to salt by many.

### Nutmeg जायफल



Nutmeg is the seed of the *Myristica fragrans* tree. The tree gives us two spices – mace from the seed-covering, and nutmeg from the seed. We also get nutmeg essential oil and nutmeg butter from this tree. Nutmeg, also known as jaiphal, has a strong aroma and taste. It is mainly used in Indian sweets but added to various savoury dishes too, mainly that have a Mughlai origin.

### Mustard seeds सरसों के बीज



Mustard seeds can be yellow, black, or brown and are used interchangeably in Indian cooking. The flavor of mustard seeds is released when they are crushed or cooked in oil. Their smoky, nutty flavor is a staple in curries and curry powders, and mustard oil is commonly used in the North of India.

### Turmeric हल्दी



Turmeric is probably the most common spice used in Indian dishes. It is said turmeric is added in every Indian dish apart from steamed rice. Turmeric or haldi belongs to the ginger family. Before being used in cooking, turmeric has been used as medicine and a dye for thousands of years. Turmeric has a warm taste and aroma. It is generally added for its colour. It has a subtle flavour too. Turmeric comes with loads of health benefits. It has antiseptic qualities. Turmeric added to warm milk can help relieve cough. Turmeric milk also improves skin health.

### Saffron केसर



The most expensive spice in the world is saffron. It is more expensive than gold! Saffron is the stigma of crocus flowers and needs to be picked by hand. Originating in the beautiful valley of Kashmir, saffron is used to add colour to desserts. It has a honey-like aroma. Saffron is added to water and warm milk for its strong taste and aroma. Buy saffron that has a deep colour; the purity of saffron is judged by its colour.

### Cinnamon दालचीनी



Cinnamon is one Indian spice that finds usage in desserts and cakes of the western world. It has a subtle sweet taste and woody aroma. A pinch of cinnamon powder can change the taste of the entire dessert. And what's more? Cinnamon does not add flavour. It comes with a lot of health benefits like lowering blood pressure and preventing cancer. Cinnamon is native to both India and Sri Lanka. It is a common spice grown in the Western ghats of Kerala, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu.

### Red Chili Powder लाल मर्चि का पाउडर



Red chili powder was introduced to Indians by the Portuguese. It originated in South America. The powder is prepared from the seeds of red chilli. Red chilli has different varieties and you will get quite a few here in the Indian market. It is very hot and should be used in a small quantity, though that depends on the amount of spiciness you are looking for. Red chilli powder too is commonly used. In fact, it is one of the most common ingredients in all South Indian curries. Dried chilli is used in many Indian dishes.

### Nigella Seeds कलौजी बीज



Jet black in colour, nigella seed is another Indian spice which is predominantly used in Eastern India. Nigella seeds are added to various Indian breads like naan, savoury biscuits, and pickles. This spice has a subtle bitter-sweet flavour and has many medicinal properties. It is used in various traditional Bengali dishes and to temper curries and dal. It is one of the main ingredients in panch phoran, an important Bengali spice mixture. Nigella seeds need to be tempered in oil and roasted dry before adding to recipes.

R. Vasanthi, H. and P. Parameswari, R. (2010). Indian Spices for Healthy Heart - An Overview. *Current Cardiology Reviews*, 6(4), pp.274-279.

Spices info: Kanksha Raina, taken from Aeroplane Hing Masala blog (<http://aeroplanemasala.co.in/blog/category/blog/>)