

Ginger—An Oldie But Goody For Your Health

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So many pesky ailments that can ruin your day, so many medications. What's a person to do when he or she suffers from common, often temporary annoyances such as diarrhea, indigestion, gas, menstrual cramps, nausea, headaches or colds?

Once upon a time... as long as 5,000 years ago, while there were few or no medical professionals and over the counter aids to come to the rescue, in every land there were plants which were mankind's medicine and food for as long as humans have existed. Many of those time-honored medicinal plants reside today in our cupboards or refrigerators and are used exclusively to tempt our taste buds in some dish or other, with little thought given in this pill-popping age to their practical medicinal properties.

Ginger, or *Zingiber officinale*, is one of those valuable plants. Native to much of Asia where the soil was moist and fertile, ginger was an effective, routine treatment thousands of years ago for all the above-mentioned ailments, plus many others. According to a USDA link to Iowa State University (extension.iastate.edu), what we call ginger was originally named *srngaveram*, which means 'horn root.' In Greek it was named *ziggiberis*, and in Latin *zinziberi*. Its current name comes from the Middle English name *gingivere*.

Even though the potent plant is commonly referred to as 'ginger root,' the part we eat is not the root at all, but an underground stem called the rhizome. The plant is a perennial creeper which requires both lots of water and a hot, dry season.

The 'pioneer' users of ginger as a medicinal (as well as food) tradition were Asians, Indians and Arabians. During the years of the Roman Empire, the herb was widely used, but when the Empire fell, so did cultivation of the herb. Marco Polo is credited with reintroducing ginger to European countries after his travels to the East. It was associated with the 'elites' of Europe because they were the only ones who could afford it. In fact, it was none other than Queen Elizabeth I of England who invented the popular Christmas treat, the gingerbread man!

Iowa State says ginger's recognized therapeutic benefits include "a decrease in nausea, cholesterol levels, blood clotting, colds, flu, allergies, inflammation, motion sickness, stomach cramps, vomiting and athlete's foot. It is also believed to work as an antibiotic agent and a strong antioxidant."

Interestingly, as 'icing on the cake,' ginger has long been known as an aphrodisiac and has been used down through the ages to arouse desire and enhance sexual activity! According to OrganicFacts.net it helps circulation, allowing blood to flow more easily to the mid-section of the body.

The site also reports on studies conducted by the University of Miami indicating that ginger helps boost bone health and relieves joint pain. Research on ginger and bone health is ongoing. Also currently under research, according to OrganicFacts, are: ginger's effectiveness in reducing heart diseases, some types of cancer, arthritis,

migraines, depression and stress-related anxiety disorders.

The active constituents in ginger are polyphenolic compounds called gingerols that have been shown to inhibit the growth of *Helicobacter pylori*, which is associated with the development of gastric and colon cancer (elements4health.com). Ginger is on the FDA's list of generally safe foods and is used to mask the taste of bitter medicines such as cough syrups.

According to the University of Maryland Medical Center (umm.edu.com), many health care professionals today recommend ginger "to help prevent or treat nausea and vomiting associated with motion sickness, pregnancy, and cancer chemotherapy. It is also used as a digestive aid for mild stomach upset, as support in inflammatory conditions such as arthritis, and may even be used in heart disease and cancer....Conventional prescription and nonprescription medicines that decrease nausea may also cause unwanted side effects, such as dry mouth and drowsiness. Given the safety of ginger, many people find it a welcome alternative to these medications."

The University of Maryland Medical Center says it is too early to tell if ginger substantially benefits people suffering from heart disease, but preliminary studies suggest that ginger may lower cholesterol and help prevent the blood from clotting. "Each of these effects may protect the blood vessels from blockage and the damaging effects of blockage such as atherosclerosis, which can lead to a heart attack or stroke."

Recommendations on amounts of ginger to be consumed for specific purposes (other than normal cooking and flavoring) are beyond the scope of this article, so use your own common sense and consult others with knowledge about medicinal foods and herbs. However, there are a few precautions to keep in mind when opting for supplemental doses as medicine, even though side effects associated with ginger are very rare:

- Don't take ginger if you have a bleeding disorder or if you're taking blood-thinning medications, even aspirin.

- People with gallstones should consult a doctor before taking ginger.

- Ginger is not recommended for children under two years of age.

- Although Americans may frequently believe ginger cakes, breads and sodas are more 'healthy' than other desserts and drinks, be aware that many of these products are made with artificial ginger and have no therapeutic benefits whatsoever. Always check the label for genuine ginger extract.

Today, the world's largest producers of ginger are Jamaica, India, Indonesia and Australia, with China and Africa also growing considerable amounts. But the plant can actually be grown almost anywhere with the right care.

Perhaps we don't appreciate how fortunate we are to be able to obtain the healthy historical herb (a good source of magnesium, manganese, potassium, copper and vitamin B6) at most any grocery store and produce our own tea, oriental cuisine or tasty health drink!

So, now are you ready to test the value of the *Zingiber officinale*?

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