

## Cook It Up With Herbs and Spices

By Cara Rosenbloom, RD

**Want a quick way to jazz up your ho-hum rice, fish or vegetables?** Add some herbs and spices. From basil to cinnamon, herbs and spices provide more than just flavor — they add health benefits, too.

**Herbs are the edible leafy green part of plants and include wonderfully fragrant cilantro, chives, parsley, thyme and tarragon.** For centuries, herbs have been used in cooking, medicine and body care products. Since herbs are leafy greens, they have the same health benefits as lettuce, spinach or kale. They are rich in vitamins A, C and K, folate, calcium, potassium and protective polyphenols with antioxidant and anti-inflammatory benefits. When using herbs, think beyond garnish. Add handfuls of fresh herbs to salads, pasta, soups, stews, chili and beans.

**Spices are the root, bark or seeds of plants that are used as flavorings and medicines.** Examples are coriander, cumin, ginger, cinnamon, turmeric and nutmeg. Spices have health benefits from minerals and polyphenols, and add warm flavors to many dishes. Spices work well when blended together; try ready-made blends, such as pumpkin spice, curry powder or Chinese five-spice powder.

**Culinary herbs and spices in recipes are used in much smaller quantities than medicinal herbs and spices in therapeutic treatment.** For example, researchers are studying cinnamon as a treatment for type 2 diabetes, and medicinal doses of six grams per day are much higher than the pinch of cinnamon you'd sprinkle on your morning oatmeal. Before you use any herbs or spices as medicine, check with your health care provider or pharmacist, since high doses may have side effects or interfere with other medications.



**Whether you prefer a brisk walk, yoga session or bike ride, there are so many benefits to exercise.** It can help reduce your risk of developing heart disease, type 2 diabetes and certain cancers; can help improve your mental health; keeps bones and muscles strong as we age; improves sleep; and may help with weight control.

**If you exercise just to lose weight,** you may be aiming for an outcome you can't fully control. Even when you eat well and exercise, the number on the scale can fluctuate. Instead of focusing solely on body weight, focus on inspiring numbers that you can control more. For example:

- **How long** can you exercise? With frequent practice, you will slowly increase your amount of activity.
- **How many** steps do you take daily? Use an app to count steps, and gradually increase your number.
- **How many** repetitions of an exercise can you do? Start with a few sit-ups, push-ups or bicep curls, and build on that number.

**After a few weeks, you will start to see progress.** If your weight goes down and your clothes fit better, that's great. But even if they don't, exercise still helps improve your well-being. That alone is worth the effort.

**Aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise per week, such as brisk walking.** Spread activities throughout the week. **Tip:** Exercising more than the 150-minute minimum brings additional benefits. Add some muscle-strengthening activities at least twice a week.

**Your first step:** Meet with your health care provider to figure out the best exercise plan for you.



## April is Cancer Control Month, a reminder to take charge of reducing your cancer risk.

Check with your health care provider to make sure you're current on screenings for breast, colon, skin and other common cancers and learn how to lower your individual cancer risk factors (e.g., smoking, lack of exercise and excess weight). Also share any family history of cancer. Learn more at [cancer.org](http://cancer.org). Screenings can catch cancer early, when it's more treatable.

## Alcohol: What You Need to Know



**Excess alcohol use carries a host of health risks.**

April is **Alcohol Awareness Month** — an opportunity to learn whether you or someone you know may need help with alcohol abuse.

**Drinking alcohol in excess is responsible for almost 100,000 American deaths each year**, resulting from car accidents and a host of diseases linked to alcohol, according to the CDC. Heavy drinking damages the liver and also raises the risk of stroke and several types of cancers.

**The first step to getting help for excess alcohol use is acknowledging there's a problem.** To that end, the CDC encourages health care providers to use short screening tests as part of regular checkups. In addition, free anonymous screenings are at health centers nationwide on **National Alcohol Screening Day, April 8.**

**The CAGE questionnaire**, used by doctors to screen for alcohol abuse, can also be used by anyone seeking information about whether they need help. It has four simple questions:

1. Have you ever felt you should **Cut** down on your drinking?  
 Yes  No
2. Have people **Annoyed** you by criticizing your drinking?  
 Yes  No
3. Have you ever felt bad or **Guilty** about your drinking?  
 Yes  No
4. **Eye** opener: Have you ever had a drink first thing in the morning to steady your nerves or to get rid of a hangover?  
 Yes  No

Two yes answers are considered a positive result and indicate it's time to seek professional help. Call your health care provider for an appointment.

**Note:** Due to production lead time, this issue may not reflect the current COVID-19 situation in some or all regions of the U.S. For the most up-to-date information visit [coronavirus.gov](http://coronavirus.gov).

# The Gut-Mental Health Connection

By Eric Endlich, PhD

**If you have ever had butterflies in your stomach when you're nervous, then you've experienced the two-way communication that exists between your digestive system and your brain.** The human gut is lined with more nerve cells than the spinal cord, which may explain the emotional shifts often experienced by people who have irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) or symptoms, such as constipation, bloating and stomach pain.

**It's believed that not only can the mind affect the gut, but the gut can also affect the mind.** In addition, antibiotics that disturb the gut ecosystem might have psychiatric effects.

**Bacteria are integral to a healthy gastrointestinal (GI) system; gut bacteria produce about 95% of our body's serotonin, a chemical implicated in depression and happiness.** Many antidepressants increase serotonin levels and also have GI side effects. Bacteria also produce hundreds of other chemicals that regulate physiological and mental processes. The gut-brain connection has led some gastroenterologists to prescribe treatments, such as antidepressants, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and medical hypnotherapy for IBS and other bowel disorders.

**Research continues on how digestive system activity** may affect thinking skills, memory, emotional behavior and pain response, as well as how messages from the gut might raise or lower risk for type 2 diabetes and other health conditions. It's possible that someday treatment for gut and psychological conditions might include a capsule of specific bacteria with therapeutic effects.



## Donate Life Month is an opportunity to learn about lifesaving organ donation.



You can register for your organs to be donated after your death. But living donors are also needed. Medically approved donors can donate liver tissue and a kidney. Bone marrow and stem cells from living donors are also needed for people whose blood-forming cells have been damaged by cancer treatments and disease. Learn more at [donatelife.net/things-you-can-do/](http://donatelife.net/things-you-can-do/).

The **Smart Moves Toolkit**, including this issue's printable download, **Tips for 10,000 Steps**, is at [personalbest.com/extras/21V4tools](http://personalbest.com/extras/21V4tools).



4.2021