



FOOD & NUTRITION

- Featured Recipes
- Diet
- Nutrition
- Spa Cuisine
- Supplements

Search Recipes:

Keyword

Type

- Appetizer
- Beverage/Smoothie
- Bread
- Breakfast
- Dessert
- Main Course
- Salad/Dressing
- Sauces/Dips
- Side Dish
- Soup
- Vegetarian/Vegan

search

Articles >> [Food & Nutrition](#) >> [Diet](#) >> Foods that Fight Pain

Foods that Fight Pain

Surprise: Your kitchen shelves are actually a medicine cabinet, filled with natural remedies for pain relief.

Once upon a time, corner drugstores didn't exist. Instead of bottles of mass-produced capsules and pills, people relied on plants and other natural ingredients that were close at hand for pain relief, trusting in the wisdom and traditions handed down by generations of elders and healers.



In folklore, medicinal herbs were often believed to be imbued with magical qualities and spiritual powers. Cultures in Asia and other parts of the world have compiled detailed pharmacopoeias of plants and their various attributes, along with recipes for their preparation for the treatment of varying complaints. By the 15th century, trade routes between Asia and Europe had expanded, introducing Europeans not only to such spices as ginger, cardamom, and turmeric, but also Ayurvedic medicine. Cardamom, a member of the ginger family, was favored by the ancient Egyptians as a perfume; and in Biblical times, turmeric was used as both a flavoring for foods and as a perfume. Turmeric, explored in several well-documented studies, has exhibited a greater ability to reduce inflammation than hydrocortisone.

Ginger's ability to provide relief for chronic joint pain associated with rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis has been shown to rival that of the non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) commonly used to reduce inflammation and block this type of pain. Cherries, red peppers, and sunflower seeds have also shown the ability to reduce the pain of headaches, gout, and muscular discomfort.

The recent uproar over the side effects of some NSAIDs have alerted consumers to their potential risks. If foods and plants have been used successfully throughout history as antidotes and cures for pain, why has Western medicine been so slow to embrace their use?

"Unfortunately," explains Jacob Teitelbaum, M.D., medical director of the Fibromyalgia and Fatigue Centers of America and author of *Pain Free 1-2-3: A Proven Program to Get YOU Pain Free!* (McGraw Hill, 2006), "almost all the information that physicians receive is paid for by the drug companies. This includes the journals they read, the conferences they go to, and the drug reps that supply them with studies. Fortunately, more and more physicians are becoming holistically oriented and are learning about natural remedies."

Pain comes in two main types: chronic and acute. Acute pain, such as a headache or the type you experience when you slip and twist your ankle, comes on quickly and usually subsides within a reasonable amount of time, or with the healing of the initial injury. Although it may start out as acute pain, chronic pain persists over a long period of time, and can give birth to side effects including depression, anger, stress, and despair, which only serve to make the original pain more unbearable.

"Cherries, turmeric, and ginger can be helpful for both, but are likely to be most effective for chronic pain," says Teitelbaum, adding that the use of botanical and food medicines is more effective if used in conjunction with other natural modalities.

"Patients do best when they combine [the use of] natural remedies, nutritional support, diet, exercise, and psycho-spiritual modalities. In my thirty years of treating patients, I have found that a simple way to assist your psyche with the healing process is to choose to keep your attention on what feels good. Joseph Campbell summarized it brilliantly when he said 'Follow Your Bliss.'"

We chose to follow Deborah Madison, cookbook author and founding chef of Greens restaurant in San Francisco, into the kitchen, where she created recipes that include natural ingredients for the relief of common pain. Madison is also the author of eight award-winning cookbooks, including *Vegetarian Cooking for Everyone* (Broadway, 1997) and *Vegetable Soups from Deborah Madison's Kitchen* (Broadway, 2006).

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Local Guides

Add these foods to your diet for healthy and pain-relieving benefits:

GINGER Pain relief for a variety of conditions, including headaches, fibromyalgia, rheumatoid arthritis, and osteoarthritis.

TURMERIC Powerful anti-inflammatory, particularly useful in the relief of pain from rheumatoid arthritis.

CHERRIES A popular remedy for gout. Can help relieve both chronic and acute types of pain.

RED PEPPERS A source of salicylates, naturally occurring pain compounds. Contains capsaicin, which stimulates the release of endorphins.

CARDAMOM The true, or green version, of this spice is useful in relieving stomach pain and digestive cramps. A member of the ginger family, it offers many of the same properties.

SUNFLOWER SEEDS A rich source of the chemical phenylalanine, which helps reduce and control pain.

BING CHERRY SAUCE WITH CARDAMOM & ORANGE

Makes about 1 1/2 cups

Cherries, a popular pain remedy in folklore, have gained new respect as new studies reveal their potential to relieve some types of pain. Also a natural remedy for arthritis, cardamom is a strong spice that carries a big flavor punch. So even though 1/4 teaspoon doesn't sound like much, it's plenty! Although fresh cherries are better, you can make this recipe with organic, frozen Bings. They're already pitted, but check for any stray pits that might have wandered back into the package. Serve this with anything chocolate, including ice cream or yogurt. The orange or rose flower water, added at the end, goes particularly well with both the cardamom and cherries.

INGREDIENTS

1 10-ounce package organic, pitted Bing cherries or 2 cups fresh, pitted cherries

4 tsp. sugar

2 large pieces of orange zest, removed with a vegetable peeler, plus the juice of one orange

1/4 tsp. freshly ground cardamom

1/2 tsp. arrowroot powder diluted in 2 teaspoons water

1/2 tsp. orange flower or rose water (optional)*

*Look for rose water in your natural food store.

PREPARATION

Put the frozen cherries (no need to defrost) in a 10-inch skillet. Sprinkle with sugar, add orange zest, and scot the pan back and forth over high heat until the cherries give up their juice. This will take several minutes.

Reduce the heat to medium, add the cardamom and orange juice and cook another few minutes.

When the cherries are hot (taste one!) remove them from the pan and place in a bowl, leaving the juice behind. Whisk in the diluted arrowroot and cook another minute or longer, if needed, to reduce to about 1/3 cup. Add the orange flower water and serve.

RED PEPPER RELISH WITH GINGER AND CILANTRO

Makes 2 cups

Red pepper is a source of salicylates, naturally occurring pain compounds that are similar in chemical composition to salicin, found also in willow bark and often referred to as herbal aspirin. Red pepper also contains capsaicin, which stimulates the release of endorphins, the body's natural painkillers. Ginger continues to reveal its usefulness in medical settings in the relief of pain associated with arthritis and fibromyalgia. You can spoon these peppers over tofu or chicken, toss them with buckwheat pasta, or use them to fill mushroom caps or any number of things.

INGREDIENTS

3 red peppers, about a pound

1 tsp. roasted peanut oil

1/2 cup finely diced red onion

2 tsp. ginger root, finely diced (about 1/2 ounce)

1/2 tsp. sea salt, plus more to taste

1-2 tsp. tamari or soy sauce

2 tsp. toasted sesame seeds

1 tbs. slivered cilantro

PREPARATION

Peel the peppers as best you can with a vegetable peeler, then halve them lengthwise, slice away the membranes, and flatten them out with your hand. Slice the peppers into narrow strips, then crosswise into pieces about 1/4-inch thick or slightly larger.

Heat the oil in a nonstick skillet. Add the onion and ginger and saute over high heat for about 4

it has coated the peppers. Taste for salt and seasonings and add another teaspoon soy sauce if you like (this will darken the appearance of the peppers). Toss with the sesame seeds and cilantro and serve.

RED LENTIL & VEGETABLE SOUP WITH TURMERIC & COCONUT MILK

Serves 4-6

Historically, turmeric has been used to address pain associated with headache, gout, arthritis, swelling, and tendonitis. There's a generous amount of turmeric in this red lentil and vegetable soup. Any tendency it has to become acrid is corrected by the inclusion of plenty of lime juice and creamy coconut milk.

INGREDIENTS

4 tsp. ghee butter or sunflower seed oil
1 cup finely diced onion
1 celery stalk, peeled and diced
1 cup diced carrots
1 cup finely diced winter squash or zucchini
1 small red bell pepper, finely diced
3 tbs. cilantro stems, minced
1 1/2 tsp. salt
1 1/2 tsp. turmeric
1/2 tsp. ground cumin
1 cup red lentils, rinsed well
1 can light coconut milk
juice of 1-2 limes, or to taste
2 scallions, including an inch of the greens,
thinly sliced
freshly ground pepper to taste

PREPARATION

Over medium heat, melt the butter or heat the oil in a wide soup pot. Add the vegetables and cilantro stems and cook, stirring occasionally, for 3 to 4 minutes. Add 1 1/2 teaspoons salt, turmeric, and cumin, and cook another 3 or 4 minutes before adding the rinsed lentils and 4 cups water.

Bring to a boil, then lower the heat and simmer, partially covered, until the lentils have broken down and are sufficiently tender, about 20 minutes. Puree about half of them in a blender and return them to the soup. Stir in the coconut milk and return the soup to a boil. Taste for salt and add several grindings of pepper and season to taste with lime juice. Serve the soup garnished with sliced scallions.

By Debra Bokur, Recipes by Deborah Madison