TURMERIC

Anti-inflammatory and Other Medicinal Properties of Turmeric

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The active curcuminoid ingredients in turmeric can reduce inflammation in patients with rheumatoid arthritis, uveitis, and other autoimmune disorders.

What is Turmeric?

Turmeric (Curcuma longa), a flowering plant in the ginger family, has been long used in Ayurvedic and Chinese medicine as an anti-inflammatory agent, a remedy for digestive disorders and liver problems, and as an effective treatment for skin diseases and wound healing. Today, in a large number of scientific studies, turmeric is being investigated in the United States for these medicinal properties, particularly its ability to reduce inflammation in patients with inflammatory rheumatic disease.

Use in Uveitis

In addition, in one study, turmeric was also found to improve symptoms in the autoimmune eye disorder uveitis. In this study turmeric was shown to be as effective as corticosteroids but free of the side effects commonly associated with steroids.

Active Ingredients

Turmeric is native to Asia, where it grows as a perennial flowering plant. The aboveground and underground roots are used to produce turmeric powder for medicinal and food uses. With its distinct golden hue, turmeric is used as a food color and as a spice or flavor enhancer. Of note, turmeric is one of the principle ingredients in curry powder. The active ingredient in turmeric is a substance known as curcumin, which belongs to the family of curcuminoid compounds.

Uses

Although among Western researchers curcumin has only recently been studied in humans, it has been widely studied in animals for its protective effect on the liver, anti-tumor action, anti-inflammatory properties and its ability to fight infections. In contrast, in Ayurvedic medicine turmeric has been studied and used as a medicinal agent for thousands of years. A teaspoon of turmeric powder in a cup of warm milk used three times daily has long been considered an effective Ayurvedic treatment for colds and influenza.

Because of its ability to induce bile flow, curcumin helps break down fats and increases the production of stomach acids. For this reason, turmeric should not be used in people
Turmeric and Arthritis

A research study funded by the NIH's National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) has explored the use of turmeric for the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis, an autoimmune condition affecting two million Americans. Rheumatoid arthritis, which is the most common of the autoimmune rheumatologic disorders, is characterized by joint swelling, pain, stiffness and a progressive loss of joint function.

In this study, conducted at the NCCAM-funded Center for Phytomedicine Research at the University of Arizona, researchers created symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis in laboratory rats that mimicked those seen in humans. Some of the rats were treated before developing inflammation and some were treated after inflammation developed with different preparations and dosages of turmeric extracts.

Results suggest that the most improvement, measured in terms of joint swelling, occurred in the rats given an extract containing only curcuminoids, the major components of turmeric, as opposed to more complex extracts containing curcuminoids plus other turmeric compounds (similar to commercially available supplements). The study's lead researcher, Dr. Janet Funk, noted that the curcuminoids-only formula also appeared safer and more effective at lower doses. Dr. Funk also noted greater effectiveness in the rats that were treated before signs of inflammation developed.

Dosage and Precautions

The usual recommended dose is 400-600 mg daily of turmeric tablets or capsules taken three times daily or as directed on the product label. Dr. Andrew Weil recommends products labeled as standard curcuminoids, cautioning that it can take up to two months before results are observed.

Turmeric should not be used in pregnancy and in patients with gallstones or bile duct obstructions unless it is under the advise of their physicians. The Center for Integrative Medicine at the University of Maryland cautions that while herbs are effective in strengthening the body and treating disease, they contain active substances that can trigger side effects and interact with other herbs, supplements, or medications.

For this reason, they recommend that herbs should be taken with care, under the supervision of a practitioner knowledgeable in the field of botanical medicine. And while turmeric and curcumin are considered safe at recommended doses, they may produce stomach upset, and, used in very high doses, ulcers.

Resources:
Researchers study turmeric and rheumatoid arthritis, InFocus publication of the Autoimmune and Related Disorders Association, December 2006.

Turmeric, Center for Integrative Medicine, University of Maryland Medical Center, http://www.umm.edu/altmed/ConsHerbs/Turmericch.html


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