



Turmeric is a yellow spice derived from the roots of the *Curcuma longa* plant. PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO

The Bottom Line

Is turmeric a golden cure for what ails you?

Studies show it can reduce pain and inflammation, and improve cognitive function and physical health



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Traditional South Asian remedies tout the anti-inflammatory effects of turmeric, and market research has found that global interest in the spice has spiked since the Covid-19 pandemic. So is turmeric a golden cure for illness and disease?

Researchers in Singapore and overseas have found that turmeric and its active ingredient curcumin could reduce joint inflammation and be used to improve cognitive function and physical health. However, others say that this research is inconclusive. As a result, health-care professionals remain divided on the medical uses of turmeric even as its market value spikes.

The market size for products containing turmeric and curcumin was estimated to be at least US\$58 million (S\$77.4 million) in 2020 by United States- and India-based market research company Grand View Research. It estimates that double-digit growth will continue until 2028, as does US-based market researcher Global Market Insights.



Mr Pushendra Sharma (left) became interested in the health benefits of turmeric during the pandemic. The permanent resident started a company, Haldy, which sells breath mints containing turmeric (above) in 2023. ST PHOTOS: NG SOR LUAN

Retailers in Singapore carry at least a dozen brands of turmeric products, including soft gel capsules and powdered extracts meant to be dissolved in water. A spokesman for FairPrice said that about 10 brands of turmeric and

curcumin supplement products are carried at FairPrice stores and Unity pharmacies, with demand stable over the past year.

Entrepreneurs are riding on the interest in turmeric as well. When Covid-19 became a global public

health emergency, Mr Pushendra Sharma and his family were based in Guangzhou, China. Without a vaccine or known cure at the time, they turned to traditional remedies to boost immunity, such as adding turmeric to their food.

When the Singapore permanent residents returned here later in 2020, Mr Sharma set up a company, Haldy, that produces lifestyle products containing turmeric as a key ingredient. His first product, breath mints containing turmeric, were launched here in February and is available online via local retailers, including FairPrice.

While the breath mints are not being sold as a health supplement, the 47-year-old father of two says he devised the product as an easy way for him and his family to consume more turmeric. "The idea was to 'go back to the roots' for boosting immunity rather than rely on medicines," he adds, punning on the plant origin and history of turmeric.

Turmeric is a yellow spice derived from the roots of the *Curcuma longa* plant. It is used in South Asian cooking and is popular in wellness edibles such as turmeric lattes and teas.

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Notable benefits, but more research needed



South Asian cooking and is in popular wellness drinks like turmeric lattes. PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO

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SUPPLEMENT VERSUS SPICE

Ms Tan Ying Xin, senior dietitian at Mount Elizabeth Novena Hospital, is on the fence regarding turmeric supplements. While there are numerous studies exploring the use of curcumin in managing arthritis, inflammatory bowel disease and regulating glucose and lipid metabolism, she says these studies are small and inconclusive.

“Higher-quality research is needed to determine its true therapeutic effects. What we do know is that by replacing salt with spices such as turmeric, it is said to help reduce your overall intake of sodium. It is also a natural way of colouring your food yellow.”

Ms Tan Shiling, senior dietitian at Mount Alvernia Hospital’s nutrition and dietetics department, says there is no official consensus on the use of turmeric or curcumin supplements.

She adds that some studies have shown that curcumin supplements are more effective than non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications in managing pain from knee osteoarthritis. There have also been some improvements in function for patients with Alzheimer’s disease, though larger studies need to be conducted to confirm this.

Gastroenterologist Andrea Rajnakova and nutritionist Veronica Cavallini, from private practice Andrea’s Digestive, Colon, Liver and Gallbladder Clinic, cite studies on the anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties of curcumin as evidence that it can help protect the body against oxidative stress and inflammation, as well as support the immune system and improve brain function.

They add that turmeric and curcumin may help improve symptoms of depression and anxiety as well as support cognitive function and memory.

However, both say that more research is needed to fully understand the effects of turmeric and curcumin. Also, turmeric supplements could interfere with other medications and should be administered only under the guidance of a healthcare professional.

The safest bet is to eat curry or foods prepared with turmeric, experts say.

Ms Tan Shiling notes that turmeric is safe for pregnant women to consume as a spice in food, but

large-dose supplements are not recommended during pregnancy.

Dr Rajnakova says: “Turmeric also contains other beneficial compounds that may work synergistically with curcumin to produce health benefits. As such, consuming turmeric as a food ingredient or spice may offer a range of health benefits beyond those of curcumin supplements alone.”

MONTHLY CURRY FOR HEALTH

Dr Ng Tze Pin, who has been leading the Singapore Longitudinal Ageing Study (SLAS), a research programme on ageing and health, for more than 20 years, suggests eating curry rich in turmeric at least once a month for health benefits.

“More than a hundred clinical trials strongly suggest that turmeric has potential benefits as a low-cost and non-toxic treatment of cancers, diabetes, obesity, heart, lungs, neurological and autoimmune diseases,” adds Dr Ng, who is visiting faculty and consultant at the National Healthcare Group’s Geriatric Education and Research Institute.

According to his research, curry consumption is associated with better lung function in older adults, and helps to maintain higher-order cognitive skills and language skills.

“Very recently, the SLAS research also showed that participants who regularly consume curry in their diet are approximately 50 per cent less likely to develop mild cognitive impairment (pre-dementia) and early dementia from three to five years of follow-up observations of those who were cognitively normal at initial examination,” he adds. These findings will be presented at a conference in Japan in June.

Other recent findings are that regular consumption of curry is associated with about a 40 per cent decreased risk of early death and an increased life expectancy of one to two years. These results will be published in the medical journal *GeroScience*, says Dr Ng.

He adds that taking pure curcumin orally has fewer health benefits compared with consuming it in curry meals, since curcumin is fat soluble and better absorbed when consumed with oils naturally occurring in turmeric and the ingredients of curry.

“Turmeric oil, together with the oils from other spices, as well as

the action of bile salts in the intestines, have the effect of emulsifying curcumin, thus making it more soluble and absorbable. It has also been shown that piperine in black pepper when combined with curcumin in turmeric is able to make curcumin 20 times more bioavailable than curcumin on its own.”

SIDE EFFECTS

International food safety organisations have determined that up to 3mg of curcumin per kg of body weight is an allowable daily intake. That works out to about 180mg for a person weighing 60kg.

Dietitian Wong Hui Xin of private practice Healthier U warns that high doses of turmeric or curcumin in supplements could increase the risk of developing kidney stones.

The supplements could also interfere with pain-relieving medication, blood thinners, drugs used in chemotherapy and immunosuppressants.

She adds: “Doses of 450mg or higher may cause headache and nausea in some people. Some may experience mild digestive issues such as bloating, acid reflux, flatulence and diarrhoea with daily doses exceeding 1,000mg a day. People also reported skin rashes after taking a dose of 8,000mg a day or more, although this seems to be rare.”

Dr Rajnakova says: “Some people may be more sensitive to turmeric or curcumin than others, and may experience side effects at lower doses. If you experience any unusual symptoms after taking turmeric or curcumin supplements, stop taking them and consult a healthcare provider.”

THE BOTTOM LINE

Consume a monthly curry rich in turmeric and pepper for health and longevity benefits. Take turmeric supplements only after consulting a healthcare professional, especially if you have medical conditions.

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• The Bottom Line is a series which aims to answer burning questions on health and well-being.