

Black Pepper

Black pepper has one of the richest histories of any spice. Originating in the south Indian state of Kerala it was traded at the Malabar coast to ships from all over the world, and became so valuable that it was referred to as 'black gold' and used as a currency. It is said that Alaric the Visigoth and Attila the Hun each demanded from Rome a ransom of more than a ton of pepper corns when they besieged the city in the 5th century. Interestingly, the same plant is used to produce white pepper, pink pepper and green pepper, only the harvesting and drying is changed. Although it was originally traded to Europeans as a spice, it has also long been used as medicine.

In India 'pippali' is actually the name of the long pepper, but the European traders mistakenly thought they were from the same plant. Black pepper is combined with long pepper and ginger in Ayurvedic medicine to make an important herbal formula known as 'trikatu'. The warming and stimulating properties of these herbs are used in an almost infinite number of ways, but always to increase the body's basic metabolic fire (agni) and burn off excessive and accumulated wastes.

Black Pepper was known and used in herbal remedies in China since at least the second century before Christ's birth. It is similarly said to 'warm the middle' and is consequently used for abdominal pain, vomiting and some types of chronic diarrhea. It is also used to 'disperse cold' and ward off upper respiratory infections, which is perhaps its easiest home application in a hearty home cooked soup. Despite its hot nature, pepper has been found of use in some fevers, but malaria in particular. Finally, as with several spices, the Chinese use pepper to both prevent and treat food poisoning.

In western herbal medicine black pepper is also known as circulatory stimulant and is used to counteract exhaustion and weakness. It is similarly used for rheumatic or arthritic pains and muscular spasms. In this capacity it may be made into an infused oil, or used today in the form of an essential oil and applied externally. Although the Ayurvedic practice of using peppercorn pastes and oils for nasal congestion should not be tried at home!

Black pepper is a very heating substance and is therefore to be used with caution. If you are naturally a hot, flushed or thirsty individual use it moderately if at all. Excessive use of black pepper in any form may over-stimulate the kidneys, with some quadriplegics or clients with weak kidney function being unable to tolerate even relatively small doses. Pregnant and lactating women should also probably not use pepper in any quantity. Finally, do not use blackpepper medicinally if you are on prescription anticoagulant drugs.

Of course, the only way to ensure optimal results is to ALWAYS buy organic!

- The Barefoot Doctor