

# Secrets of a seasonings box

That small pinch of jeera you take from the masala dabba is meant to do more than just enhance the flavour of your curry. Spices have other great spin-offs: they have some lesser known health properties



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tossed into an array of dishes, from kadhis to simple sabzis. Some even mix it in the dough for rotis, puris and samosas. Its one big plus: it boosts digestion. So if you're bingeing on some seriously rich food, either sprinkle some carom seeds into the seasoning or into a glass of butter-milk to make the satiated post-meal smile last. There's also the grandmother's recipe: season carom seeds in ghee and mix with rice to ease an upset tummy.

**NIGELLA OR ONION SEEDS (kalonji)**  
Nigella seeds are typical to North Indian cooking and their peppery pungent flavour makes them a spice you either love or hate. "Nigella seeds contain some amounts of calcium and potassium. They are believed to have anti-inflammatory, anti-allergic and anti-bacterial properties," says Krishnaswamy. They also contain phytonutrients that help in iron absorption.

**FENNEL SEEDS (saunf)**  
Fennel is used liberally in pickles as well as in seasoning to liven up even something as dull as a cabbage sabzi. And if they aren't a part of your meal, chew on them post-dinner, with or without sugar. Fennel, like carom, is favoured primarily for its digestive properties. The sweetened version that is more commonly available is not recommended for its high sugar level.

**SESAME SEEDS (til)**  
Sesame seeds are a good source of protein, calcium, phosphorus, iron and vitamin E. They are recommended to help relieve menstrual pain and skin problems. "There are two kinds of sesame seeds. The black sesame seeds, commonly used in chikki and ladoos, are good for anemic patients. White sesame seeds, used in dishes during the festival of Sankranti, are rich in calcium," says Dr Krishnan.

**CLOVE (laung)**  
The first home remedy you turn to for any dental trouble or that nagging cough, the clove is most commonly used in pulao. It contains a fair amount of calcium, iron and zinc. "Clove helps in the treatment of diarrhea, indigestion, hernia, ring worms, fungal infections and athletes foot," says Dr Krishnan. "Eugenol, which gives the clove its aroma, helps prevent arterial blood clotting, which helps prevent heart attacks." ■



swati.anand@timesgroup.com

SWATI ANAND  
TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Call it tadka, vaghar, vagarne or popu, the Indian seasoning is a ubiquitous process in almost every Indian recipe. And the seasoning box — typically, a round steel box containing whole spices in little bowls with tiny spoons — is a standard fixture in every Indian kitchen. But the little grains of spice add more than aroma and flavour to our diet. Almost all spices contain antioxidants of various kinds. The antioxidants help to scavenge free radicals from our body and enhance our immune system. Spices also contain soluble fibres which help lower cholesterol, maintain blood sugar levels and control weight.

However, one must limit the use of spices in certain health conditions. For instance, cumin, coriander and fenugreek seeds should not be

consumed in excess by kidney patients because they contain high levels of potassium. But if you are fit, sprinkle it generously for flavour and much more.

**MUSTARD SEEDS (sarson or rai)**  
These little black grains find their way into cuisines across India, but are a particular favourite with Bengalis. "Mustard seeds are a good source of protein, fibre, iron, zinc and mono unsaturated fatty acid (MUFA). They are also high in magnesium and phosphorus," says Bangalore-based dietician Sheela Krishnaswamy. Mustard seeds also contain allyl isothiocyanate, which inhibits the growth of cancer cells.

**CUMIN SEEDS (jeera)**  
An excellent source of iron, jeera is favoured for its distinct, yet not overpowering flavour. It is virtually indispensable in North Indian cooking be it dal, sabzi or that buffet staple: jeera rice.

## MASALA WISDOM

- Spices don't need very specific conditions or temperatures for storage, but if stored carelessly, they lose colour, taste and aroma
- To increase their shelf life, store spices in cool, dry places away from direct exposure to bright light, heat, and moisture
- Avoid storing spices too close to the stove, oven, dishwasher or refrigerator, where rising steam or heat can come into contact with them
- Spices must be stored in airtight containers to protect them from moisture and to preserve the oils that give them their rich flavour and aroma
- Try to buy small quantities of the spices so that they stay fresh

Down south, it is a part of the aromatic rasam powder. Use it generously as it is high in calcium, magnesium and phosphorus. And it's also a home remedy for flatulence and improved digestion.

**FENUGREEK SEEDS (methi)**  
Fenugreek seeds are used for their unique flavour, whether as a part of the dosa batter or the Bengali-Oriya spice mix 'panch phoran'. It can leave a slightly bitter aftertaste, so it is best used in small quantities. "Fenugreek is very good for lactating mothers when it is used in ladoos. It induces lactation and also helps balance the insulin level in the blood," says Dr Nupur Krishnan, director of Mumbai-based nutrition clinic Biologics Healthcare.

**CAROM SEEDS OR THYMOL SEEDS (ajwain)**  
A favourite in Gujarat and UP, carom seeds are

# More than just eye accessories

Contact lenses should not be treated like casual beauty props. To avoid infection and corneal damage, make sure you treat them right and wear them with great care

## Things you should know if you use contact lenses

- Do not handle contact lenses without first washing your hands
- Contact lens cases must be cleaned every day. They should be discarded and replaced periodically because they may serve as a breeding ground for bacteria and fungi
- Once a week, they should be washed with hot water and allowed to air dry
- In young children (younger than 9 years of age), contact lenses are usually prescribed only for medical reasons
- Different types of lenses have different care routines. In general, lens care involves rinsing them upon removal, cleaning them and storing them in a disinfecting solution
- Homemade or non-contact lens saline solutions should never be used
- Lenses should be worn and discarded as directed. If they are to be replaced on a scheduled basis (for example, daily or weekly), it is dangerous to use them beyond the prescribed date. Replace as required
- The safest way to wear lenses is to wear them on a daily basis and discard them every day. This avoids the use of solutions and decreases handling

KOUNTEYA SINHA  
TIMES NEWS NETWORK

It was unthinkable for Swetha Das to ever appear in public wearing spectacles. Not only did she wear contact lenses through the day but she also left them on through the night.

She woke up to the dangers of what she was inflicting on her eyes three days before she was to go up on stage at a local beauty pageant.

When she got out of bed that morning, Swetha's eyes were red, itchy, watery and painful. The ophthalmologist's diagnosis was swift: she was suffering from a corneal infection because of the constant use of lenses. She would have to give her eyes a break for two weeks. That was pretty much the end of Swetha's pageant dreams.

An increasing number of youngsters today are choosing contact lenses over granny glasses. But what many fail to realise is that though contact lenses have cosmetic uses, they remain in close proximity to the cornea and need to be used very carefully. If they are used mindlessly, they can result in eye infections, some which can even cause permanent corneal damage.

Experts say complications due to the misuse of contact lenses can arise in two situations: due to their overuse and also bad hygiene and awkward fit. Says Dr J S Titiyal, professor of ophthalmology at All India Institute of Medical Sciences: "The contact lens market in India is growing at 30 per cent every year, mainly due to the



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younger generation. But the problem is with non-adherence to simple rules relating to the use of such lenses."

The fitting of the lenses is a very important procedure to which few pay any attention. The size, diameter and curvature of the lens have to correlate with the patient's eye. But most customers simply go to a lens shop, pick a pair that appeals and then get it fitted by a salesman, instead of asking for the assistance of a trained ophthalmologist, optometrist or refractionist. "This can be very damag-

ing. You cannot treat lenses like over-the-counter drugs," says Dr Titiyal.

Going to bed wearing lenses is a common enough practice among Indian teenagers and one that can cause serious damage to the eyes. "Overnight usage of lenses decreases the amount of oxygen available to the eye and increases four-fold the chances of infection. It increases the risk of corneal infections, keratitis (inflammation of the cornea), corneal ulcers and corneal abrasions. Lenses should always be taken off at night before you go to sleep," cautions

Dr Eric Papas from the Brien Holden Vision Institute, Australia, who was recently in India.

Another problem common in India is the overuse of contact lenses, beyond their prescribed life. "All lenses are designed for a specific time frame — they may be disposable on a monthly or daily basis. Wearing them for longer can lead to protein deposits or bacterial growth, resulting in eye irritation or papillary conjunctivitis," Dr Papas adds.

Indians use contact lenses far less than countries such as Taiwan and the US, a mere 1 per cent compared to the 18 per cent of the latter countries. Soft lenses and rigid gas permeable (RGP) lenses are the main lens

types available in India. Each has specific indications for use as well as a specific wear-and-care regimen to be followed by users.

"Indians do not believe in annual eye check-ups which is imperative. Around 70 per cent of patients who experience eye-irritation from the use of contact lens use do not even report it to their eye doctor. Contact lenses should also not be shared between individuals — we hear of such instances in India. This can lead to ocular infections," says Dr Papas.

According to Dr Titiyal, chances of eye infection are seven times less in monthly disposable lenses as compared to longer lasting ones. For similar reasons, it is also better to buy

## EYE WARNING

- Using daily disposable lenses could be a good way for users to keep their eyes healthy
- Even now, the contact lens market in India is small — it's a Rs 60-crore market but is growing fast
- While contact lenses are safely used by millions of people every day, they do carry a risk of eye infection. Factors contributing to infection include: use of extended-wear lenses; reduced tear exchange under the lens; environmental factors and poor hygiene. Redness of the eyes associated with pain, blurred vision, and light sensitivity is more serious and may signal a potentially blinding condition, such as a corneal ulcer due to an infection caused by contact lenses
- If you have a question about your contact lenses, you should contact your ophthalmologist
- If you experience redness, blurred vision, pain or light sensitivity, you should contact your ophthalmologist or optometrist

**Overnight usage of lenses decreases the amount of oxygen available to the eye and increases the risk of corneal infections, ulcers and abrasions**

lens solutions in small bottles. Larger bottles act as reservoirs for bacteria. It is best to chuck any unused solution at the end of every month. Contact lens case should not only be washed every day but also changed every six months. A lot of youngsters today opt to wear coloured contact lens as casual cosmetic accessories. There is even greater danger in how people misuse these just because they are not powered. "What people fail to realise is that in the end, contact lenses are still a medical device. They need to be cleaned and used in the same way as powered contact lenses," says Dr Papas. ■

kounteya.sinha@timesgroup.com