Cilantro – Flavorful and Healthful

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Cilantro (an herb also known as coriander and Chinese parsley), has a rich history going back thousands of years. The Spanish introduced it to Mexico and Peru, where it became an essential part of Latin dishes. It has gone on to become a familiar favoring in other cultures: Asian, Caribbean, Middle Eastern and Indian foods.

Some may confuse cilantro with flat leaf Italian parsley because of similar appearance, but one sniff would easily clear up the confusion. The unique smell and taste of cilantro is unmistakable. Actually you can eat the entire plant – stems, seeds, leaves and all. It grows easily in a pot and is available year-round in the supermarket.

Like many other herbs, cilantro has a reputation for being an antibacterial agent. This makes sense when you consider the tradition of sofrito, a cooking base that stars tomatoes and herbs like cilantro which is used in a number of cultural dishes. Before refrigeration, such herbs might have helped fend off foodborne illness. Two recent studies identified a number of compounds in cilantro that could effectively increase bacterial activity that impeded Salmonella growth.

Cilantro has served as a traditional treatment for diabetes and cholesterol. Now researchers have found a link between the extract of cilantro and reduced hyperglycemia in laboratory diabetic rats; so it appears to help with blood sugar control. It may also possess anti-inflammatory action. In rats fed a high-fat diet with added cholesterol, coriander seeds lowered total and LDL (bad) cholesterol and raised HDL (good) cholesterol.

These and other health-protective effects of cilantro may be due to their rich phytonutrient profile scientists are just beginning to find.

For best enjoyment, buy cilantro that is crisp and deep green, without signs of wilting or yellowing. Before you store cilantro, rinse it well and place it moist (but not wet) in a plastic bag for up to one week in the refrigerator.

Enjoy cilantro by the handful. Its zesty flavor blends well with a number of spicy crunchy foods. And if cilantro is already a favorite of yours, now you know there are additional health reason to enjoy it more.

Recipe to include: Costa Rican Cabbage Slaw

1 cup seeded and diced tomatoes  
½ cup firmly packed minced fresh cilantro  
1 cup finely chopped red bell pepper  
1 small head green cabbage, finely shredded  
½ cup freshly squeezed lime juice  
½ teaspoon salt

1. Mix the tomatoes, cilantro and red pepper in a bowl.  
2. Add the cabbage and toss.  
3. Add the lime juice and salt at the last minute so the cabbage doesn’t wilt.

Makes 6 servings.  
(Source: Environmental Nutrition)

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*Spanish translation provided by Kelly Loeb, MSW through Support of the Kansas Department on Aging