

Asparagus As Food And Medicine

By Alison Birks, MS, AHG, CNS

Asparagus is not only one of the most delicious of spring vegetables, it is nutritious as well. It is a good source of folate (266 mcg/ cup cooked), fiber (3.6 g/cup), heart-healthy potassium (401 mg/cup) and antioxidants such as lutein and zeaxanthin (1.4 mg/cup), which are important for eye health. It is low in calories and contains some calcium and magnesium as well.

Asparagus has a long history of use as a folk medicine for liver, kidney, bladder and heart health, in the form of juice, tea or soup. There is some scientific support for these uses, as asparagus shoots contain the non-essential amino acid asparagine, which is diuretic in large amounts. Asparagus has been used clinically in combination with other botanicals as a weight loss aid and high blood pressure remedy. The plant contains the phytoestrogens diosgenin and kaempferol. Diosgenin is anti-inflammatory, which may partially explain its traditional use as a natural medicine for arthritis. Studies on liver function in humans have shown that asparagus induces phase II detoxification enzymes in the liver, which also lends credibility to its traditional use as a blood purifier or liver cleanser. Asparagus also contains phytosterols, which are clinically proven to lower blood cholesterol by removing dietary cholesterol from the body.

Several anti-cancer compounds have been isolated from asparagus, including ursolic acid, which induces apoptosis or cell death in vitro cancer cell lines. The roots contain steroid-like compounds which are active against human cancer cells. The vegetable is a good source of anti-oxidants, including a unique sulfur-containing compound called aminoethylcysteine ketimine. Epidemiological studies on fruit and vegetable intake found that frequent consumption of asparagus reduced the incidence of lung cancer.

Asparagus may also help to prevent colon cancer. It contains inulin, a fructooligosaccharide (FOS) that encourages the growth of beneficial bifidobacteria in the colon. These probiotic bacteria digest and ferment inulin into short chain fatty acids, such as butyrate, which have been found to prevent tumor development in animal models. FOS may also enhance calcium and magnesium absorption. It is for this reason that some yogurt manufacturers are adding inulin to their products.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that about 50% of the population has a gene which makes the urine smell strongly malodorous (like rotten cabbage) after ingesting asparagus. Those who have the gene cannot metabolize certain sulfur compounds contained in asparagus. There is no known benefit or harm from this peculiarity.

To obtain the medicinal benefits of asparagus, it can be eaten raw or lightly cooked. Juice of asparagus can be drunk in the spring and summer as a detoxifying, cooling, alkalizing remedy. Some natural medicine practitioners recommend a day-long asparagus fast as a cleanse. Unlimited amounts of asparagus can be eaten in the form of salad, pureed soup or as a steamed vegetable. A little flaxseed oil and lemon juice can be used as a dressing. Asparagus tea can be prepared by steeping 1 heaping tablespoon of the chopped vegetable in boiling water for 10 minutes.

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