

January 17, 2005 / Vol. 165, No. 2

Food for the Brain

Can an ingredient in Indian curry help prevent Alzheimer's?

BY BRYAN WALSH

Fans of Indian cuisine know a spicy curry can go straight to the head—and now medical science backs them up. A recent study by researchers at the University of California Los Angeles and the Greater Los Angeles Veterans Affairs Healthcare System concludes that curcumin, the substance that gives the curry spice turmeric its yellow pigment, may help combat Alzheimer's disease. In India's ancient Ayurvedic health system, the spice is known as an anti-inflammatory and a cleanser of blood. Alzheimer's researchers became interested in it due to evidence that the prevalence of the neurological disease among the elderly in India may be considerably lower than that in the U.S.

In the study, scientists found that elderly lab rats fed curcumin experienced a reduction in the beta-amyloid proteins found in the brains of Alzheimer's victims. When researchers tested curcumin on human beta-amyloid proteins in a test tube, the chemical blocked the proteins from forming destructive plaques—meaning that curcumin could be useful for treating Alzheimer's, and more importantly, for preventing it. Dr. Greg Cole, the lead researcher, hopes that curcumin could be for Alzheimer's what aspirin has become for heart disease: a simple, safe and affordable preventative. New Delhi-based restaurant consultant J. Inder Singh Kalra, who has touted the holistic value of Indian food on his TV cooking show for years, hopes such news will instruct younger Indians, who have been turning to unhealthy Western food. "It's the great tragedy of this country," says Kalra, "that we won't value our own culture unless it comes back to us from the West."