



Saffron - so much more than just a spice ...

In Spain, saffron is most commonly known as a key ingredient of paella. Why, might you ask, has it been predominantly replaced with yellow food colouring? The reason is that it takes approximately 150 flowers to produce just 1,000 mg of dried saffron threads - making it the world's most costly spice by weight.

Its price may also be influenced by its diverse medicinal powers that have been documented since ancient times. In 2004, researchers studying 3,500 year old frescoes on a Greek island in the Aegean, Thera, found imagery of a goddess supervising the extraction and use of a drug from the saffron flower. Additionally, 50,000 year-old cave art in Iraq was found to contain saffron-based pigments, indicating that the use of saffron dates back even further.

Nowadays, saffron is showing great promise in managing serious neurodegenerative conditions such as Alzheimer's disease. In 2010, a 22-week trial of saffron in the management of mild to moderate Alzheimer's disease was published. It illustrated that 15 mg of saffron twice a day was as effective as 5 mg dose of Donepezil - the pharmaceutical drug commonly used for treating Alzheimer's symptoms - at the same regularity. The trial also highlighted that saffron elicited significantly less vomiting as a side effect. Another 16-week, randomised and placebo-controlled trial was also published in 2010, indicating that said dose - 15 mg of saffron twice a day - was both safe and effective in the treatment of mild to moderate Alzheimer's disease.

The petals of the saffron plant have also been proven as nearly equal in potency to Prozac & Imipamine, as a treatment for depression. Other experimentally confirmed potential therapeutic uses of saffron, along with aiding the healing of wounds, have been applied to treating: anxiety disorders, low sperm count, cardiac hypertrophy, chemotherapy-induced liver toxicity, colorectal cancer, diabetic neuropathy, irregular menstrual cycles, erectile dysfunction, hypertension, middle cerebral artery occlusion, inflammation, multiple sclerosis, liver cancer, pancreatic cancer, opiate addiction/withdrawal, psoriasis and respiratory disease.

As with any natural product with this high a level of potency - anything other than moderate culinary usage should be carried out in close consultation with a qualified herbalist or your healthcare provider, particularly when mixing it with over-the-counter medication.

