

# Research undermines the spicy claims

CINNAMON WAS hailed for its medicinal value in ancient China, Egypt and Rome. Access to cinnamon was at the heart of Portuguese, Dutch and British claims to govern the island of Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon). Then, as now, cinnamon was an important spice for flavouring foods and drinks.

In 2003, a research study was published which reported several benefits for type 2 diabetes patients who took 1g-6g of cinnamon daily. This report made cinnamon very popular as a dietary supplement. However, several varieties of cinnamon exist. For many years, most commercial cinnamon was grown in Ceylon and called "Ceylon cinnamon" or "true cinnamon".

Due in part to various wars in the region during the 20th century, cinnamon is now cultivated in many parts of the world. This has led to some variation within the species and identification of related species.



**DÓNAL O'MATHÚNA**

## DOES IT WORK?

Despite claims as to its efficacy, research shows cinnamon makes little difference to treatment of diabetes

The study, published in 2003, used "Chinese cinnamon" or "cassia cinnamon". Although the two species are very similar, cassia cinnamon is less expensive than Ceylon cinnamon, as it has a harsher taste. Many products contain a mixture of the two types of cinnamon.

### Evidence from studies

A number of laboratory experiments had found that various compounds in cinnamon affect glucose and insulin levels. Researchers from Pakistan tested the effect of cinnamon on patients with type 2 diabetes because of these findings, and this led to the 2003 publication of their research.

Their study divided patients into groups of 10 who each received 1g, 3g or 6g of cinnamon, or a placebo, daily. After 40 days, all those taking cinnamon had significant improvements in fasting blood sugar, triglyceride, LDL and

total cholesterol levels. While all these changes are beneficial for diabetic patients, those taking the placebo had no changes.

Following on from this first study, four similar studies have been published. They all used cassia cinnamon, not Ceylon cinnamon. A German study found reductions in fasting blood sugar levels after diabetic patients took 1g cinnamon daily for four months.

However, none of the other blood tests done showed any improvements. Research conducted in the Netherlands, the United States and Thailand found no changes in any blood test conducted on the type 2 diabetes patients in these studies. Earlier this year, a systematic review of all these studies concluded that cinnamon does not appear to offer benefit to diabetic patients.

### Problematic aspects

None of the clinical trials

reported adverse effects with doses up to 6g per day, or taking the supplement for up to four months.

However, cassia cinnamon contains coumarin which is toxic to rat livers.

There are fears that very high doses might be toxic in humans, although this would require consuming huge amounts of cinnamon.

More realistically, people with liver problems might be more sensitive to coumarin and should be very careful taking cinnamon at the supplement doses. Also, some pharmaceutical drugs carry a risk of damaging the liver, and should not be taken together with cinnamon supplements. Anyone concerned about this should talk with their doctor or pharmacist.

Ceylon cinnamon contains barely any coumarin and thus does not raise this concern. However, none of the research with diabetic patients has used Ceylon cinnamon.

### Recommendations

While cinnamon contains compounds that interact with insulin and blood sugar, crude cinnamon supplements do not show consistent benefits in diabetic patients.

Current research suggests that cinnamon is not an effective treatment for diabetes.

Patients with diabetes whose blood sugar levels are stable should talk to their doctor about any plans to try cinnamon or any other supplement.

If they have an effect, other medications may need to be adjusted.

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# Lessons to move you

IN THIS era of global culture, an increasing number of holistic approaches to health find their way to Ireland. And so it is with the Feldenkrais Method, a system of gentle movement exercises which is popular throughout the world, particularly in central and northern European countries.

Until two years ago, German-born Sabine Volkmann was the only teacher of the Feldenkrais Method in Ireland. Now, there are about five teachers working here and another three in training. "It is still not widely known in Ireland, but the results are so good that more and more people are hearing about it," says Volkmann.

Somewhat similar to the Alexander Technique, the Feldenkrais Method is a system of gentle movement exercises which are taught in a class or on a one-to-one basis. The idea behind the approach is that we have developed limiting patterns of movement that cause us undue physical and mental stress and tension. By becoming aware of how our personal movements limit us, we can then re-learn more natural movements.

"It's different from exercise because in the classes we put a lot of attention on learning what patterns of movement are there and through movement, we find out what needs to be changed.

"It's as if the new posture grows from within, because the approach that encourages you to pull your shoulders back and

**SYLVIA THOMPSON**

Gentle exercise can help us to re-learn how to move naturally to combat stress and tension

sit upright doesn't work anyway," says Volkmann.

The Feldenkrais Method was founded by Russian-born engineer and physicist Moshe Feldenkrais, who suffered from a knee injury from playing football intensively in his youth. A suggested surgery had at the time only 50 per cent chance of success, so Feldenkrais decided instead to study the mechanics of human movement and to teach himself how to walk without pain.

"He was also a Black Belt in Judo so he developed his method from a combination of his knowledge and experience," says Mark Keogh, a Dublin-based teacher of the Feldenkrais Method who trained in Switzerland.

Moshe Feldenkrais lived and taught his approach in Israel and then later in the United States. Now there are training programmes throughout the Western world, and teachers of the Feldenkrais Method run both group classes which are called Awareness Through Movement, and one-to-one hands-on sessions called Func-



### Sabine Volkmann in her Feldenkrais Method class.

Photograph: Brenda Fitzsimons

tional Integration classes.

Stella Cignini attends group classes in the Feldenkrais Method. "I have some problems with my ankles and if I walk or stand for too long, they become painful. I have found that the Feldenkrais Method helps," she explains.

"Feldenkrais said that posture is the pause between moving in different directions. And your feelings, emotions and thinking is all connected to movement," says Keogh. "For instance, your thoughts are carried in a certain posture and your feelings change the way you walk. Unless you've got conscious control of various parts of your body, they will do their own thing. With conscious control, the effort gets distributed more easily throughout the whole system."

turn over," says O'Brien.

Sonia Gamble is a qualified physiotherapist who has also just completed a degree in drama. She regularly goes to classes in the Feldenkrais Method. "In my work as a physiotherapist, I find that a large number of clients' problems such as repetitive strain injuries are related to their posture.

"Correcting posture is difficult without awareness and the Feldenkrais Method has helped me give guidance to people to help them become aware of postural problems," she explains.

"In acting, being more aware of your body and movement is important for creating characters. So, I find the approach helps me know my own habits to help me work out whether to use or remove them to create a character," she adds.

## Feldenkrais: the facts

### What is it?

The Feldenkrais (pronounced fel-den-krice) Method is a system of gentle movement exercises which increases body awareness and thus helps to relieve tension, pain and stress.

### What are its origins?

It was founded by Russian-born, Moshe Feldenkrais (1904-1984) who believed that improving movement is the most direct way of improving quality of life

### What problems can it help?

The Feldenkrais Method helps to improve posture and general body co-ordination.

It is beneficial for sufferers of chronic pain and people who suffer from multiple sclerosis or who have had a stroke have found classes in the method can help restore functional movement

### Are there any contra-indications?

The Feldenkrais Method is not a therapy as such, but a form of re-training the body.

Any undiagnosed pain or injury should be first diagnosed by medical practitioners

### How can I find out more?

There are currently about five teachers of the Feldenkrais Method in Ireland.

Three of these run Awareness through Movement classes at various venues in Dublin.

They also offer one-to-one hands-on sessions which are called Functional Integration classes.

See [www.ascendant.ie/feldenkrais](http://www.ascendant.ie/feldenkrais) for list of teachers in Ireland