Accurate Clinic
2401 Veterans Memorial Blvd. Suite16
Kenner, LA 70062 - 4799
Phone: 504.472.6130 Fax: 504.472.6128
www.AccurateClinic.com

Accurate Education

Nutraceuticals: Curcumin

Curcumin, the active compound found in turmeric, is a polyphenol with anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties that make it very useful in pain management for osteoarthritis, neuropathic pain and other conditions. Curcumin has been widely studied regarding its use for pain and other conditions, including many random controlled trials (RCTs) providing good quality evidence to support Moderate to High Confidence levels of benefit.

This handout explores curcumin's therapeutic benefits, synergies and dosing.

Therapeutic Benefits - Conditions

- **Osteoarthritis**: Reduces pain and inflammation (High confidence RCTs).
- **Rheumatoid Arthritis**: Decreases disease activity (Moderate confidence RCTs).
- **Crohn's Disease/Ulcerative Colitis**: Improves remission rates (High confidence RCTs).
- **Gut Health**: Supports gut barrier and reduces IBS/IBD symptoms (High confidence RCTs).
- **Metabolic Health**: Improves insulin sensitivity (~10–20%), lowers glucose,(High confidence RCTs).
- **Cardiovascular Health**: Lowers LDL and BP (~10–15%), (Moderate confidence RCTs).
- **Cognitive Function**: Enhances memory and reduces amyloid-β in Alzheimers (Moderate confidence RCTs).
- **Depression**: Improves mood (Moderate confidence RCTs).
- **Systemic Inflammation**: Lowers inflammatory markers (~10–20%), (High confidence RCTs).
- **Oxidative Stress**: Reduces ROS and boosts antioxidants (High confidence RCTs).

Dietary sources: Fresh turmeric root (has only 20–180 mg curcumin/100 gm root and curry powder (has only 10–50 mg/100 gm powder), these provide insufficient doses to gain therapeutic benefits.

Curcumin Supplements: Dose: 500–2000 mg/day. Liposomal or nano-formulations (e.g. Meriva) are necessary for adequate absorption to achieve significant benefits.

Synergies:

NSAIDS – Curcumin enhances NSAIDs in osteoarthritis (500 mg/day (~30% better pain relief) by inhibiting COX-2 synergistically.
Gabapentin – Curcumin may synergistically reduce central sensitization and oxidative stress
Nutraceuticals – Curcumin may synergize with other anti-inflammatories and antioxidants including **Resveratrol**, **EGCG** (Matcha, green tea), **Quercetin**, **Alpha lipoic acid** and **Omega-3** (EPA + DPA).
Adaptogens – With **ashwagandha**, curcumin enhances stress reduction and anti-inflammatory effects for anxiety/depression and with **Rhodiola**, it synergizes for fatigue via AMPK activation.

Safety: Curcumin is generally safe, with mild gastrointestinal upset at very high doses (>4 gm/day), but consult your doctor if taking blood thinners or diabetes medications.

Iceberg" Drugs: Curcumin can be described as an "Iceberg" drug, one in which, as in "the tip of the iceberg," the perceivable or measurable benefits (i.e.pain relief, lower blood sugar) are outweighed by the benefits that remain imperceivable or unmeasureable (i.e. the prevention of a condition).

In the case of curcumin, these silent benefits are potentially the strongest argument for supplementing with it, particularly when it comes to chronic pain. The following pain-related conditions are likely to benefit from supplementing with curcumin:

Therapeutic Benefits - Suppression of the Driving Forces of Pain

Curcumin has been used in traditional Ayurvedic medicine India for centuries to reduce inflammation, protect tissues and support overall wellness. It is strongly recommended for its ability to reduce systemic inflammation and oxidative stress, key drivers of pain amplification and chronic disease.

"*Systemic Inflammation***"** and **"***Oxidative Stress***"** are two conditions that contribute to chronic pain by creating a cycle of tissue damage, immune cell activation, and pain amplification. By disrupting normal cellular physiology, these conditions also contribute to the development and progression of chronic disease processes, including peripheral and central sensitization, opioid analgesic tolerance while also facilitating the transition of acute to chronic pain.

- **Systemic inflammation** is a widespread inflammatory response throughout the body, triggered by infection, injury, stress, and other conditions. It involves the release of pro-inflammatory molecules and activation of the immune system, contributing to chronic pain and leading to various health issues. Symptoms can include increased pain, fatigue, cognitive problems, depression, decreased physical activity, and, in severe cases, organ dysfunction. While inflammation is a natural part of the healing process, chronic or excessive systemic inflammation can contribute to the development of diseases like heart disease, diabetes, and autoimmune disorders.

- **Oxidative stress** is an imbalance of excessive "oxidants" (oxidizing or chemically active agents, like free radicals, that are obtained from the diet or produced by the body) and insufficient "antioxidants" that neutralize oxidants (chemically active agents also obtained from the diet or produced by the body). Oxidative stress and chronic systemic inflammation coexist because they mutually induce each other. Oxidative stress, caused by excessive free radicals and insufficient antioxidant defenses, damages nerves and other tissues which leads to persisting pain. Furthermore, this damage also triggers more inflammation, further exacerbating pain.

- **Neuroinflammation** is inflammation within the nervous system (brain, spinal cord and peripheral nerves), Systemic inflammation produces inflammatory molecules that cross the blood-brain barrier, activating immune cells in the brain thus contributing to neuroinflammation that drives sensitization.

- **Peripheral and Central Sensitization** Sensitization refers to the increased nerve connections and associated hyper-responsiveness in nerves following intense or prolonged pain, tissue injury or nerve damage. This sensitization leads to greater intensity and spread of pain to non-injured areas.

- **Opioid Analgesic Tolerance (OAT)** is a multifactorial process that leads to reduced pain benefits normally generated by use of an opioid. Curcumin helps fight oxidative stress and suppresses inflammation and help temper the progression of OAT.

- **Transition of Acute to Chronic Pain** The factors that contribute to the transition of acute to chronic pain are complex, but inflammation and oxidative stress are significant conditions that drive transitioning. Curcumin, with powerful antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties may help reduce this transition.

Curcumin

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Sensitization

1. Peripheral and Central Sensitization

Curcumin addresses peripheral and central sensitization, mechanisms amplifying chronic pain. Peripheral sensitization occurs in nociceptors (pain receptors), where curcumin inhibits TRPV1 channels in sensory neurons, reducing hypersensitivity to heat and chemicals. Central sensitization involves spinal cord and brain changes; curcumin modulates NMDA receptors in dorsal horn neurons, lowering glutamate excitotoxicity.

Preclinical studies in rats (200 mg/kg/day) show curcumin reduces mechanical allodynia in neuropathic models by downregulating BDNF in spinal glial cells, preventing sensitization.

Human studies data are indirect, with RCTs in osteoarthritis (500 mg/day) suggesting reduced pain hypersensitivity via NF-κB inhibition in synovial tissues.

Evidence: Low confidence; more human trials needed.

2. Opioid Analgesic Tolerance

Curcumin may mitigate opioid analgesic tolerance, the reduced efficacy of pain medications like opioids over time. Tolerance involves mu-opioid receptor downregulation in neurons; curcumin enhances receptor sensitivity by inhibiting PKC in spinal cord, preventing desensitization. Animal rat models (200 mg/kg/day) show curcumin delays morphine tolerance, maintaining pain relief by reducing NF-κB in dorsal root ganglia. Human data are limited; a pilot study (500 mg/day) with NSAIDs in osteoarthritis suggested sustained efficacy, but no direct tolerance trials exist. Low confidence; preclinical promise warrants human studies.

3. Transition of Acute to Chronic Pain Acute postoperative treatment with curcumin has demonstrated anti-hyperalgesic activity by reversing mechanical hyperalgesia, and repeated treatment facilitated the recovery of postoperative pain . However, repeated treatment before surgery did not exert impact on the prevention or reduction in postoperative pain.

The results emphasize that acute curcumin treatment may be useful in treating postoperative pain.

Curcumin may prevent the transition from acute to chronic pain by interrupting inflammatory cascades. Acute pain transitions to chronic via persistent NF-κB activation in immune and nerve cells, leading to central sensitization. Curcumin inhibits this in preclinical models, reducing IL-6 and TNF-α in spinal cord after injury. Rat studies (100 mg/kg/day) show curcumin attenuates post-surgical pain chronicity by lowering ROS in dorsal root ganglia, preventing nerve remodeling. No human RCTs directly address transition, but osteoarthritis trials (500 mg/day) suggest reduced chronic inflammation. Low confidence; preclinical data indicate potential.

Curcumin has been widely studied regarding its use for pain and other conditions, including many favorable meta-analyses, systematic reviews, and random controlled trials (RCTs) providing good quality evidence to support Moderate to High Confidence levels of benefit.

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Curcumin Supplements: Dosing of 500–2000 mg/day. Enhanced formulations (liposomal or nano-formulations (e.g. Meriva) are necessary to provide adequate absorption essential to achieve significant benefits.

Safety: Curcumin is generally safe, with mild gastrointestinal upset at very high doses (>4 gm/day), but consult your doctor if taking blood thinners or diabetes medications.