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Can eating onions help prevent the flu?

Onions have been used for centuries as remedies for many ailments. Along with garlic and other Allium vegetables, onions were commonly used to prevent and treat illnesses before antibiotics and other over-the-counter pharmaceuticals were widely available. Today, onion is widely considered by many to be one of the most beloved flavors in the human diet as well as a source of healthful remedies for illnesses.

Onions possess a wide variety of organic compounds, such as flavonoids, organosulfur compounds, and fructans, that may offer protective effects against certain microbial pathogens. Scientific investigations in recent decades have generally supported the antimicrobial nature of onion, onion compounds, and onion extracts; although it is important to note that very little clinical research has been conducted on such questions. Furthermore, there is a lack of information on the dosage and form necessary to achieve a particular outcome. For example, onion extracts may inhibit the growth of certain bacteria in a Petri dish, but little to no information exists on whether or how one could achieve an inhibitory effect on a bacterium by eating an onion.

Recently, many people have asked whether onions are capable of preventing or treating viruses such as the Coronavirus (COVID-19). Viruses are pieces of nucleic acid (the same material that makes up DNA) covered by a protective coat. They are not typically considered to be “living” in the way that bacteria or fungi are; but they are microscopic and therefore may be considered in the general class known as microbes.

There is some evidence that the compounds found in onion may have anti-viral properties, and there are some published scientific studies that demonstrate some protective effects of onion compounds on the influenza virus. Nothing is yet known on whether the compounds found in onion would have protective or inhibitory effects on COVID-19. It is important to consult a medical professional when considering options for prevention or treatment of serious diseases such as COVID-19.

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