

Tomato's Anti-cancer Power

The tomato, is a fruit so commonly used in Jamaica that its healing power is taken for granted. (And yes, it's a fruit, not a vegetable, because it contains the ovary of the plants and its seeds). Lycopene is the nutrient most studied in the tomato. It is a carotenoid (similar to the pigment found in carrots) which has potent anti-cancer activity. It has been found to reduce prostate cancer risk. In fact, a landmark study (by Erdman and Canene-Adams) published in the journal Cancer Research found that when tomatoes are combined with broccoli as part of a daily diet, the prostate tumour-fighting effect is more pronounced. The researchers believe that bioactive compounds in each food work on different anti-cancer pathways but have an additive effect. They experimented with rats, and after 22 weeks, when they weighed the prostate tumours of the rats on the 10 per cent tomato/broccoli combination diet, they found that they outperformed rats on all other diets, shrinking prostate tumours by 52 per cent. More potent than vitamin E Scientists say that lycopene (generally found in red and orange-coloured fruits and vegetables) is not a necessary nutrient in the human diet. However, it is transported into the bloodstream with LDL fats and tends to accumulate in organs such as the testes, adrenal glands and liver. As a potent antioxidant (believed now to be more potent than vitamin E as an antioxidant), lycopene reduces DNA damage to the body's cells, slowing the ageing process and giving protection against chronic diseases such as cancer. Some preliminary studies show lycopene as playing a role in reducing the risk in cardiovascular disease, diabetes, osteoporosis and male infertility. There has also been some research on two other compounds, coumaric acid and chlorogenic acid, both found in tomato - which may help to prevent lung cancer as they are thought to block the effects of nitrosamines, carcinogens in tobacco smoke and which are also formed naturally in the body. Choose deep-red tomatoes The deep, bright-red tomatoes have the most lycopene, so choose those when you go shopping. Raw, uncooked tomatoes are nutritious, but in order to receive the maximum amount of the lycopene and antioxidant power of this fruit which is not water soluble, it should be cooked with a healthy oil, such as olive oil. Processed tomatoes such as ketchup and salsas are actually better than the raw, uncooked fruits, as the former have a higher bioavailability of the important nutrient, lycopene. I bet that you will never look at a tomato in the same way again, and you certainly will never prepare a meal without it. Eulalee Thompson is health editor and a professional counsellor