

The Cancer-Fighting Power of Tomatoes

You've heard the term "an apple a day keeps the doctor away." Well, how about, "tomatoes each week, keeps your health at peak?"

Not only are these bright red, juicy fruits filled with vitamins and minerals, but they can also lessen the risk of cancer, says Katrina Sommer, an advanced clinical dietitian with OSF HealthCare.

"They have these extra 'bonus nutrients' we call phytochemicals. They're found in plant foods, and these help us fight inflammation and act as an antioxidant. This helps get the free radicals out of there that lessen the risk for cancer development," Sommer says.

Sommer and her team at the OSF Cancer Institute in Peoria, Illinois work alongside cancer patients on what diet is best for them to fight cancer. She says plant foods play a huge role.

"We know a diet that is mostly plant-based, can help lower our risk for cancer and other diseases like heart disease and diabetes," Sommer says. "It helps us keep a healthy weight, too."

What is Lycopene?

"Lycopene is one of those phytochemicals. There's a lot of different groups of these phytochemicals. One of them is called carotenoids. Carotenoids a lot of times will give the plant food its color. Lycopene is a type of carotenoid and gives the tomato that bright red or orange color," Sommer says. "Lycopene is also found in watermelon, grapefruit and is the red or pink color you see."

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) identified 72 human and animal studies and concluded that lycopene contained anti-cancer activities. Now, the NIH says the next step is to identify a population that might benefit from lycopene supplementation.

"It's been shown that eating tomatoes a couple times a week can help lessen the risk of metastatic prostate cancer," Sommer adds.

Cook tomatoes and drizzle olive oil

"These need to be absorbed very well in our system. To do that, cook them and you can drizzle olive oil on them so we can absorb those nutrients optimally," Sommer says.

What if I don't like tomatoes?

"Think of those tomato foods that are cooked. Tomato sauce or tomato soup are good options. They help absorb the lycopene and carotenoids that are in there. So, it doesn't just have to be a fresh tomato on a salad, you can eat it cooked as well," Sommer says.

How can red meat or processed meat affect my risk for cancer?

"Something to consider is how much meat you're eating, especially red meat and processed meat. Too much of these can raise the risk of developing cancer," Sommer says. "Same with drinking alcohol. We want to lower the amount of alcohol we drink or avoid it if we can."

Another food factor to consider if you want to avoid cancer - Sommer says to watch out how much added sugar you have in your diet. Too much added sugar intake can affect our weight in negative ways, while not providing any beneficial nutrition. Sodas are a part of this equation due to the added sugar and lack of beneficial nutrition they offer.

“Eating too much fast food or processed food doesn’t have the nutrients we need. It might not have the fiber we get in the plant foods. It doesn’t really help our bodies fight inflammation or cancer risk, so it can raise the risk for cancer developing,” Sommer says.

Overall, Sommer recommends being more mindful of your overall diet and considering the foods and drinks you’re bringing into your body if you want to do everything you can to prevent cancer.