

## THE NITTY-GRITTY ON TOMATOES

**What is so great about a tomato?** Tomatoes are loaded with a substance called lycopene. It gives them their bright red color and helps protect them from the ultraviolet rays of the sun. In the same way, it can help protect your cells from damage. Tomatoes also have potassium, vitamins B, E, and other nutrients.

**What is Lycopene?** Lycopene is an antioxidant -- it fights molecules called free radicals that can damage your cells and affect your immune system. Because of that, foods high in lycopene, like tomatoes, may make you less likely to have lung, stomach, or prostate cancer. Some research shows they might help prevent the disease in the pancreas, colon, throat, mouth, breast, and cervix as well.

**Are tomatoes good for the heart?** Lycopene also may help lower your levels of LDL, or “bad” cholesterol, as well as your blood pressure, and that may lower your chances of heart disease. Other nutrients in tomatoes, like vitamins B and E and antioxidants called flavonoids, may boost your heart health, too.

**I Heard that tomatoes are high in Potassium. Can I eat tomatoes if I have high potassium levels?** Tomatoes are higher in potassium than bananas. Potassium is a naturally occurring mineral that plays a key role in how your body works. Among its many functions, potassium helps keep your heartbeat regular and your muscles working properly. If you have a high potassium level, do not eat tomatoes. Excess potassium is normally removed by the kidneys. But if your kidneys are not working properly, they may not be able to keep your potassium at a healthy level. It can be very serious. **High potassium can make you more likely to develop serious health issues. These could include an irregular heartbeat, heart attack, or temporary paralysis. In some cases, high potassium can even lead to death.**

**How are tomatoes good for the eyes?** Tomatoes have substances called lutein and zeaxanthin that may help protect your eyes from the blue light made by digital devices like smartphones and computers. They also help keep your eyes from feeling tired and ease headaches from eyestrain.

**Are tomatoes good for the lungs?** Some studies show that tomatoes may be helpful for people who have asthma and may help prevent emphysema, a condition that slowly damages the air sacs in your lungs. This is because lycopene, lutein, and zeaxanthin, among other antioxidants, fight the harmful substances in tobacco smoke, which is the leading cause of emphysema.

**I heard that tomatoes even help blood vessels!** Getting more tomatoes into your diet may make you less likely to have a stroke, which is when blood flow gets cut off to a part of your brain. Studies suggest that they may ease inflammation, boost your immune system, lower your cholesterol levels, and keep your blood from clotting. All those things help prevent strokes.

**Tomatoes are acidic, is that good for oral health?** Studies have shown that lycopene may help with the gum diseases gingivitis and periodontitis in the same way it may help prevent cancer -- by fighting free radicals. But eating lots of raw tomatoes can damage the enamel on your teeth -- thanks to the high amount of acid -- and brushing soon afterward can make that worse. It's a good idea to wait at least 30 minutes before you brush.

**Does Lycopene protect our skin like it does the tomato?** Hats and sunscreen can help shield you from the sun. Well, the lycopene in tomatoes may do something for that, too, possibly in the same way it protects tomatoes. It's not a substitute for sunscreen, and you don't put it on your skin. It helps, though, by working on your cells from the inside.

**Is it better to eat canned or fresh tomatoes?** Both can be good for you but in different ways. Nutrients like lycopene may be easier for your body to take in and use from canned tomato products; however, the heat that's used to process canned tomatoes can destroy vitamin C and other nutrients.

**What is the best way to eat tomatoes?** Fresh summer tomatoes with buffalo mozzarella cheese, olive oil, and basil -- it's beautiful and delicious. The combo also works from a health perspective: Your body needs the fat in ingredients like cheese and olive oil to absorb and use certain nutrients, including lycopene. So, you must eat fat when you eat a tomato for the lycopene to be absorbed.

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