

More Reasons to Eat Tomatoes

There are not many people who don't enjoy a big, luscious, juicy tomato. This is tomato season, so please, take advantage of all that red delicious goodness! If you really are just ho-hum about tomatoes for their flavor, there are plenty of reasons to eat them for their health benefits. The newest health reason for eating tomatoes is that, at least for men, eating tomatoes seems to really reduce the risk of stroke.

Besides being delicious, tomatoes are full of nutrients and antioxidants, and low in calories. One of the most effective antioxidants is lycopene, which just happens to also be the red pigment that gives tomatoes their color. Other antioxidants in tomatoes include the carotenoids, a whole group of pigments that make fruits and veggies yellow, orange and red. They are all good for us, and will all help keep us healthy in various ways. One, beta-carotene, is where vitamin A comes from.

What this new research found is that, in over 1,000 men who were studied for 12 years, those who had the most lycopene in their blood were much less likely to have a stroke. In fact, they were less than half as likely to have strokes caused by blood clots as the men with the least lycopene in their blood. That's a pretty big difference! The other orange and yellow carotenoids didn't have any effect on strokes. So unfortunately, yellow tomatoes don't help. Vitamins A and E were also measured, and they didn't help either.

Among antioxidants from fruits and vegetables, lycopene is getting a reputation for being an all-round super guy. It's been tied to better memory and less Alzheimer's disease. It's been connected to better vision and less macular degeneration. It's so effective at stopping oxidation in the blood that it reduces inflammation and lowers cholesterol. It helps the immune system work better against attacks. It stops blood clots in other places than the brain. And it protects our cells against damage to our genes and DNA. That will probably eventually be tied to lower cancer rates, but the work hasn't been done yet.

Of course the next question is often "So how much of it do I need?" And there's no good answer to that. There is no Recommended Daily Intake of lycopene. Lycopene pills are not likely to

be of much help because all the other carotenoids, vitamins and minerals have been lost or damaged. Diets high in tomatoes as well as other red, yellow and orange fruits and vegetables will be the most effective. ChooseMyPlate.gov recommends at least 5 fruits and/or vegetables a day, in a wide variety of colors.

Now here's one surprising tidbit – you're better off eating cooked tomatoes than raw ones! Even better, cook those tomatoes with a little bit of oil. The lycopene is tied up inside the tomato cells. When we cut the tomato open and expose it to air, the lycopene is released. So we can absorb more of it from chopped, sliced or diced tomatoes. Cooking helps soften the tomato cells even more. But, lycopene is fat soluble. So having a little fat or oil in the dish too means we get the most out of it.

If you really can't stand tomatoes, not even tomato sauce or salsa, lycopene is also found in watermelons, guavas and pink grapefruit. But tomatoes are the best, most concentrated source. So please, have a tomato. Or two or three!

Here's a super easy chicken dinner to help you get your daily dose of tomatoes. If you prefer to use cherry tomatoes, cut them in half and use enough to make 4 cups. Serve this dish with baked spaghetti squash for an extra bit of yellow vegetable, and a lot less carbohydrate than regular pasta. Bake the squash alongside the chicken while the oven is hot. It might take a little longer than the chicken, so put it in first. Enjoy!

Italian Chicken Bake with Spaghetti Squash

4 large, ripe fresh Florida tomatoes	1 8-oz can mushrooms, drained
8 small (4-oz) chicken breast fillets	1 envelope onion soup mix
1 8-oz bottle Italian salad dressing	2 bay leaves
½ tsp oregano	1 large or 1 medium spaghetti squash

Preheat oven to 350°F. Wash squash and cut in half lengthwise. Scoop out seeds. Put cut side down in baking dish. Add ½ inch of water. Put in hot oven to bake. Wash tomatoes and cut in quarters. Arrange tomatoes and mushrooms in bottom of 9x13 inch baking dish. Lay chicken pieces on top. In small bowl combine soup mix, salad dressing, bay leaves and oregano and pour over chicken. Bake for 1 to 1 ¼ hours, until thermometer in center of breast reads 165°F. Remove bay leaves. When squash can be pierced with a fork remove from oven and let cool slightly. Use a fork to scrape spaghetti from skin. Serve chicken over squash spaghetti. Serves 8.

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