

FEBRUARY 2010 TO YOUR *HEALTH*

EAT RED FOR VALENTINE'S DAY

National "Eat Red Week," encourages Americans to discover the [heart-healthy](#) power of red fruits and vegetables. Cherries (especially tart cherries), red grapes, tomatoes, red chili peppers—all these plant [Valentines](#) are loaded with [phytonutrients](#) our hearts, arteries and veins just love.

- **Tart cherries.** Tart cherries get their deep red color from disease-fighting phenols called anthocyanins. Michigan State researchers found that tart cherries contain the highest concentrations of anthocyanins 1 and 2, which help block the cyclooxygenase enzymes (COX-1 and COX-2) that are also the target of common pain meds like aspirin, ibuprofen, and acetaminophen.⁽¹⁾

Tart cherries contain 30-40 milligrams of anthocyanins 1 and 2 in every 100 grams (3 ounces) of fruit. (Blueberries lack anthocyanins 1 and 2, but keep eating them; they're packed with lots of other good things!) Tart cherries outstrip sweet cherries in the anthocyanin/phenol department, delivering more than twice as many per 100 grams (92-47 milligrams in sweet cherries vs. 312 milligrams in tart ones).

Tart cherries also score way high on a lab test called the Oxygen Radical Absorbance Capacity (ORAC), which measures how many [free radicals](#) a food can neutralize. (Damage done to cells, tissues and organs by free radicals is a key factor not only in cardiovascular disease, but also in virtually every chronic, degenerative disease, not to mention, aging.)

A person needs to consume 3,000 to

5,000 ORAC units each day for blood levels to maintain a good antioxidant defense system, nutrition researchers estimate. Just slightly more than 3 ounces (100 grams) of tart cherry juice concentrate delivers 12,800 ORAC units. A single ounce supplies 3,622 ORAC units. A quarter cup of dried tart cherries weighs in at 3,060 on the ORAC scale, and a half cup of frozen tart cherries supplies, on average, 1,362 ORAC units.⁽²⁾

Other research recently published in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition revealed that tart cherries rank 14 in the top 50 foods for highest antioxidant content per serving size – surpassing well-known antioxidant stars like red wine, dark chocolate and orange juice.⁽³⁾

- **Red grapes.** "How do I love thee? Let me count a few of the ways I protect your heart..."

Resveratrol, a flavonoid found in the skin of red and purple grapes (and therefore in red, but not white wine), improves blood flow by stimulating the production and/or release of nitric oxide (NO), a molecule made in the lining of blood vessels (the endothelium) that signals the surrounding muscle to relax, dilating the blood vessel and increasing blood flow.⁽⁴⁾

Resveratrol also inhibits angiotensin II, a hormone secreted in response to high blood pressure and heart failure. Angiotensin II can damage the heart because it tells cardiac fibroblasts, the family of heart muscle cells responsible for secreting collagen, to proliferate. The resulting production of excessive amounts of collagen causes the heart muscle to stiffen, reducing its ability to pump blood efficiently.⁽⁵⁾

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Pterostilbene, another antioxidant in grapes, activates PPAR-alpha. The PPARs are a family of receptors on our cells that mediate their absorption of compounds for use in energy production. PPAR-alpha is crucial for the metabolism of lipids, including cholesterol. ⁽⁶⁾

- **Tomatoes.** A number of recent studies have found that women with the highest intake of **lycopene-rich** tomato-based foods have a significantly reduced risk of heart disease. In the most recent, a 4.8 year prospective case-control trial involving almost 40,000 middle-aged and elderly women in the Women's Health Study, as the women's blood levels of lycopene went up, risk for cardiovascular disease dropped-- lots.

The women were stratified into four groups, according to their dietary lycopene intake. After excluding those with angina, women whose plasma lycopene levels were in the three highest groups were found to have a 50% reduced risk of cardiovascular disease compared to those with the lowest blood levels of lycopene. ⁽⁷⁾

- **Red chili peppers.** Firing up your tastebuds with **chili peppers** can help protect the cholesterol in your blood from oxidation - a first step in the process that leads to atherosclerosis. In a randomized, crossover study involving 27 healthy subjects (14 women, 13 men), eating freshly chopped chili greatly increased cholesterol's resistance to free radical injury.

Subjects were randomly divided into 2 groups. For 4 weeks, half the subjects ate a freshly chopped chili blend (30 grams/day, about 1 ounce), consisting of 55% cayenne, while the other half consumed a bland diet (no chili and other spices were kept to a minimum). After 4 weeks, the groups switched

diet for another 4 weeks. Blood samples were taken at the beginning of the study and after each diet.

After the chili-diet, the amount of free radical damage to cholesterol was significantly lower in both men and women than after the bland diet. In addition, after eating the chili-spiced diet, women had a longer lag time before any damage to cholesterol was seen compared to the lag time seen after eating the bland diet. In men, the chili-diet also lowered resting heart rate and increased the amount of blood reaching the heart. ⁸

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