



Seeing red

Fed up with faddy, exotic “health” foods? The good news is that the ultimate superfood couldn’t be easier to come by – the humble, everyday tomato

Every month a new “superfood” is touted as the latest miracle cure. Recently, we’ve heard about the health benefits of exotic fruits like pomegranates, goji berries and acai berries, with walnuts and even beetroot similarly lauded. But when it comes to healthy eating, it seems that old favourites are often the best. In fact, the humble tomato may just be the healthiest superfood of all.

That’s the finding of research pharmacist Ron Levin, whose new book, *The Red Bodyguard* (Icon, £5.99), extols the virtues of the fruit. He was inspired to write his book by international studies that showed that the frequency of severe chronic diseases, such as cancer and heart disease, often varied quite dramatically between one region and another. “This prompted me to seek out the factors that were influencing the variations,” Ron explains. “I discovered that among the vast array of fruits and vegetables consumed, one in particular had become the focus of increasing research attention: the tomato.”

Drawing together the evidence gathered by hundreds of scientists over the past 28 years, he has summarised some of the reasons why tomatoes are so beneficial. In short, they are rich in natural antioxidants, flavonoids, potassium, betacarotene and vitamins that are essential for skin, heart, and eye and breast health. They are also high in fibre and

low in sugar, fat and salt free. And one medium-size tomato provides 50 per cent of the recommended daily dose of vitamin C.

But most importantly, tomatoes are the best source of a potent antioxidant chemical called lycopene that help fight the cell damage that can trigger cancer. Lycopene also plays a key role in the prevention of disease, suppressing the production of an insulin-like growth hormone called IGF-1 that stimulates the spread of prostate and breast cancer.

Under the skin

The trouble is, the typical British diet is low in lycopene. We eat just over one milligram of the antioxidant a day, instead of the recommended five to eight. So the fact that people living in Mediterranean countries consume so many more tomatoes than us is thought to be a key contributing factor in their generally superior health.

And it’s not just the fact that they eat more tomatoes that helps, it’s also the way they are served. The power of lycopene is not lost in cooking – and actually intensifies if tomatoes are cooked with olive oil, a combination of ingredients that is found in many French, Italian and Greek dishes.

If you need yet more evidence about the power of the tomato, then research has also shown that the fruit is rich in lutein, which

plays an important role in the protection of eyesight. Tomatoes may also help reduce the risk of heart attacks, first by having a similar effect to the cholesterol-lowering drugs, statins, and secondly by preventing the blood clumping together to form clots in hardened arteries. Meanwhile, Ron Levin also cites a study that looked at the role of fruits and vegetables in the development of prostate cancer. Of the 46 foods tested, only four significantly lowered the risk of the cancer: fresh tomatoes, tomato juice, tomato sauce and tomato purée.

Tomato tips

Here’s how to get the most out of the everyday superfood:

- The darker red the skin of the tomato, the richer it is in nutrients.
- Raw tomatoes aren’t necessarily the best option – lycopene is more easily absorbed from tomato sauce or paste.
- It’s recommended that you eat three to four tomato products each week, and try to combine each serving with up to a teaspoonful of virgin olive oil.
- Don’t forget that pizza, pasta sauce and even organic ketchup can all count towards your weekly intake.

For more information about Ron Levin’s book, visit theredbodyguard.co.uk