



Letter to the editor: The Pundit Speaks
By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.
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"Is Lycopene A Cancer Killer?"

Lycopene is the "tomato" antioxidant that is hailed in lay magazines as a possible cure for the prevention of heart disease, cancer of the prostate, breast, lung, bladder, ovaries, colon and pancreas. Lycopene is also touted as being useful in treating HPV virus infections, which is a major cause of uterine and cervical cancer. Some even claim to use lycopene for treating or preventing cataracts and asthma. However, all of this must be looked at with an circumspect eye. We must be prudent when considering such outlandish claims and in the end, we must rely on the scientific evidence, not testimonials, opinions or sales pitches. Lycopene is a natural chemical that gives fruits and vegetables a red color and it has an especially high content in tomatoes. One cup (240 mL) of tomato juice contains about 23 mg of lycopene and the cooking process to make tomato paste or ketchup, changes the lycopene into a form that is more readily useable by the body; whereas, usually, cooking removes some of the helpful components of fresh fruits and vegetables. Now, let's look at the scientific data. First, studies of tomatoes and studies of lycopene are two different things and there is little correlation between the two. In 2007, the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute* reported that the FDA conducted a review of the scientific evidence of claims about the cancer benefits of lycopene or tomatoes and concluded: 1) there is no credible evidence that lycopene reduces the risk of prostate, lung, colorectal, gastric, breast, ovarian, endometrial, or pancreatic cancer, 2) there is no credible evidence that tomato consumption reduces the risk of lung, colorectal, breast, cervical, or endometrial cancer, and 3) there is very limited evidence that tomato consumption reduces the risk of prostate, ovarian, gastric, and pancreatic cancer. Some investigators even suggest that "metabolic products of lycopene, the lycopeneoids, may be responsible for some of lycopene's reported bioactivity (not its antioxidant character)." According to WebMD, developing research suggests that lycopene may worsen established prostate cancer and they recommend avoiding it if one has a diagnosis of prostate cancer. However, other sources disagree. Actually, all men could be considered as being "pre-cancerous" for prostate cancer, because if a man lives long enough, he will likely develop prostate cancer.

In the America that I love, we will remain guarded as regards wild, unsupported claims of miraculous cancer cures. We must also remember that supplements do not undergo governmental quality controls and that contaminants are frequently found in them when tested by ConsumerLab.com. Currently, there is insufficient evidence to draw firm conclusions. Study agents called "validated biomarkers" are tricky and frequently unreliable. So, lycopene lacks support. Still, I love Creole tomatoes.

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