**Tomatoes – A Healthy Choice**

*By Janet Hackert, Regional Nutrition and Health Education Specialist*

Although once thought to be poisonous, tomatoes are in fact a healthy choice.

Tomatoes belong to the nightshade family which includes the poisonous plant, belladonna. The tomato itself is nutritious, but its leaves and stem contain alkaloids that can be harmful, especially to pets. The tomato is the fruit of the plant. In fact it is the berry because of the way it grows on the plant. It is generally considered a vegetable though, because of the way it is served and eaten.

Tomatoes contain potassium, lycopene, lutein and zeaxanthin that make them especially nutritious. Potassium may reduce risk of cardiovascular disease, and Diane L. McKay, assistant professor at Tufts University’s Friedman School says, “Tomatoes are among the highest food sources of potassium in the American diet.” Lycopene in tomatoes make up about 80 percent of the typical diet according to an article in the July 2014 issue of Tufts University Health and Nutrition Letter. Studies have shown lycopene may lower risk of stroke, improve cholesterol and triglyceride levels, have a “protective effect against prostate cancer (especially with cooked tomato products),” and “help protect against caners of the pancreas, stomach and lungs,” the article reports. Lutein and zeaxanthin may help prevent age-related macular degeneration.

For optimal quality in fresh tomatoes, look for “plump, heavy tomatoes with smooth skin,” recommends the MU Extension Seasonal and Simple app (found at [http://seasonalandsimple.info](http://seasonalandsimple.info)). Store ripening tomatoes at room temperature for up to a week. They will continue to ripen when placed at room temperature in the sun. It is not recommended to store tomatoes in the refrigerator unless they will be used to make a sauce. With the cooler temperatures, the cell structure is affected, softening the tomato. Also, according to the Tufts article, “French scientists recently demonstrated that when tomatoes are refrigerated, volatile compounds that contribute to flavor begin to break down.”

Tomatoes themselves come in a wide variety of sizes, shapes, and colors, and tomato products and dishes are varied. Although freshest is usually considered most nutritious, heat processing tomatoes actually releases lycopene from the cells making it more available. With so many options to choose from, find one that works for you and those you serve food to and enjoy the health benefits of this season’s crop now and throughout the year.

For more information on tomatoes or any other topic, contact me, Janet Hackert, at 660-425-6434 or HackertJ@missouri.edu or your local University of Missouri Extension office.

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