MORE EVIDENCE THAT TOMATO SAUCE MAY LOWER PROSTATE CANCER RISK

Two recent articles provide some good news for men who like tomato sauce on their pasta or pizza.

Building on their earlier 1995 report, Edward Giovannucci, MD, ScD, and colleagues from the Harvard Medical School and the Harvard School of Public Health, tried to resolve the conflict in the literature as to whether or not consumption of tomato products reduces the risk of prostate cancer. They reported their findings in a recent issue of the Journal of the National Cancer Institute (2002;94:391-398).

As in their previous report, the authors analyzed data from the Health Professionals Follow-Up Study (HPFS), a large prospective cohort study of over 50,000 male dentists, optometrists, osteopaths, podiatrists, pharmacists, and veterinarians who were ages 40 to 75 in 1986.

Compared with the previous analysis, the current study was based on over three times as many prostate cancer cases, longer duration of follow-up, and it added two additional food frequency questionnaires to the original 1986 survey.

More Sauce, Less Cancer

Even after accounting for the effect of non-random associations with established prostate cancer risk factors, the investigators found a significant association between prostate cancer risk and consumption of tomato sauce. Men who ate two or more servings of tomato sauce per week had a 23% lower risk of developing prostate cancer than did men who consumed less than one serving per month.

The association was less strong for all-source consumption of lycopene, the carotenoid antioxidant found in tomato-based foods, as well as in grapefruit, watermelon, and some other fruits and vegetables. Compared with those in the lowest fifth of lycopene consumption, men in the highest quintile had a 16% lower risk of developing prostate cancer.

There was another good finding as well for the heavy sauce eaters. Even when they were diagnosed with prostate cancer, their tumors were less likely to be locally advanced or to have metastasized.

Based on these results, the authors conclude, “…that the intake of tomatoes and tomato products is associated with a decreased risk of prostate cancer…[and] that increased consumption of tomato and tomato-based products may be prudent; such a recommendation is consistent with current health guidelines to increase fruit and vegetable consumption.”

They also caution that tomato-based foods probably contain other chemopreventive nutrients in addition to lycopene, and that the efficacy of taking lycopene as a supplement is uncertain.

Add Some Oregano Too

On a related note, a recent report in the American Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry (2002;49:5165-5170) found oregano to have the highest antioxidant activity of the 27 culinary herbs and 12 medicinal herbs they analyzed.

In fact, on a per-gram basis, oregano and other fresh herbs ranked even higher than fruits and vegetables that are known to be high in antioxidants. Oregano has 42 more times antioxidant activity than apples, 30 times more than potatoes, and 12 times more than oranges.
Dried Herbs Don’t Cut the Mustard

Investigator Shiow Y. Wang, PhD, of the US Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Beltsville Agricultural Research Center in Beltsville, MD, and colleagues also found that in general, fresh herbs and spices contain a higher level of antioxidant activity than their dried or processed counterparts. Garlic is a good example—fresh garlic is one and a half times more potent than dry garlic powder.

“People should use more herbs for flavoring instead of salt and artificial chemicals,” said Wang. Adding a moderate amount of fresh herbs may go a long way toward boosting the health value of a meal, Wang said.

And for those who do not like oregano, other herbs also have antioxidant effects. Among the more familiar are dill, garden thyme, rosemary, and peppermint. Although herbs may be a quick and easy way to get a concentrated source of antioxidants without all the calories of whole foods, Wang said, herbs are no substitute for a balanced diet. Just as consuming too much of any food product can carry health risks, herbs should be used in moderation.