

What does the color red symbolize to you? For many, especially during the month that includes Valentine's Day, red means love. Some may think of the American Red Cross – an organization that immediately steps in to be the lifeline for victims when tragedy and crisis strike. Perhaps red symbolizes the American Heart Association's Heart Month or the Go Red for Women's healthy heart campaign.

Regardless of what comes to your mind with you think about this color, it appears that a common thread among all of these symbolic meanings for the color red is that it is linked to health and/or wellness at some level. This holds true for the role red fruits and vegetables have for a person's health and wellness.

Red fruits and vegetables contain a variety of health-promoting phytochemicals such as lycopene and anthocyanins. Phytochemicals naturally occur in plant-based foods, especially fruits, vegetables, whole grains, beans, nuts, seeds, herbs, spices, wine and tea. Although there are about 4,000 phytochemicals, lycopene and anthocyanins are among those that are more commonly researched.

There are two key health benefits researchers have identified from lycopene. A diet rich in foods containing lycopene may reduce the risk of prostate and other cancers. Research conducted in Finland has found a connection between this phytochemical and stroke protection. In this study, researchers studied more than a thousand middle-aged men for 12 years. Those with the highest amount of lycopene in their blood had a 55% lower chance of having any kind of stroke. The connection was even stronger (59%) when it came to protecting against strokes that were caused by blood clots. Red fruits rich in lycopene include tomatoes and pink grapefruit. Watermelon is a great source of this phytochemical, as well.

Anthocyanins are the red pigments found only in select fruits and vegetables. Like the phytochemical, lycopene, anthocyanins also have proven to provide specific health benefits. A Harvard University study has found a positive connection between red berries and Parkinson's disease. A diet rich in anthocyanins, especially from berries, showed a decreased risk in the disease. Red fruits rich in anthocyanins include red raspberries, strawberries, sweet cherries, guava, cranberries and red apples. Vegetables that provide higher levels of anthocyanins include beets, red cabbage, kidney beans, red onion, and red beans.

Red fruits and vegetables are rich in a variety of other nutrients needed to maintain health, including vitamins A and C, folate, and potassium.

Vitamin A is found in tomatoes and tomato products (sauce, paste, and puree), watermelon, sweet potatoes and red sweet pepper. This fat-soluble vitamin is important for normal vision, the immune system, and reproduction. Vitamin A also helps the heart, lungs, kidneys, and other organs work properly.

Vitamin C (also known as ascorbic acid) is found in grapefruit, strawberries, tomatoes and tomato products, and raspberries to name of few. This water-soluble vitamin acts as an antioxidant in the body. The body also needs vitamin C to make collagen, a protein required to help wounds heal. In addition,

vitamin C improves the absorption of iron from plant-based foods and helps the immune system work properly to protect the body from disease.

Our bodies need folate to make DNA and other genetic material. Folate is also needed for the body's cells to divide. This nutrient is found in strawberries, beets, and blackberries. A form of folate, folic acid, is needed in higher amounts during pregnancy to reduce the risk of certain birth defects.

Red fruits and vegetables that contain high levels of potassium include strawberries, sweet potatoes, and tomatoes. This mineral is very important for healthy body functioning. Your body needs potassium to build proteins, break down and use carbohydrates, build muscle, maintain normal body growth, control the electrical activity of the heart, and to control the acid-base balance in the body.

Research indicates that foods representing the red color group may help promote a healthy heart, a lower risk of certain cancers, memory health, and urinary tract health. The richer and deeper the color of a fruit or vegetable, the more vitamins, minerals, and phytochemicals it contains.

Even though February is the month we celebrate with red hearts and red roses, you can celebrate a healthier body by making sure you consume fruits and vegetables that are rich with red pigments and other deep vibrant colors. If you're looking for some fruits and vegetables that give you a vibrant variation of color check out the abridged Fruit and Veggie Color list provided.

<insert chart>

Half of your daily food intake should come from fruits and vegetables. Knowing which ones give you the best nutritional value, like the red ones highlighted above, will help your body's immune system, heart, digestive system, and so much more. For more information on developing healthier eating habits, contact me at the Geary County Extension office at 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!