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Chapter 31: Mediterranean Countries—Food Science Activity

Lycopene Value of Mediterranean Cuisine

Tomatoes are naturally rich in lycopene. Lycopene is a phytochemical, which is a compound from plants that is active in the human body. Many studies have shown that lycopene can lower the risks of heart disease and some types of cancer.

Research by food scientists indicates that lycopene is more “bio-available” from cooked tomatoes. Just a few minutes of cooking was enough to raise the lycopene value. Even greater increases were seen after 30 minutes of cooking. Cooking decreases vitamin C value, but the boost in lycopene may make eating cooked tomatoes better for your health than eating raw tomatoes.

Tomatoes are featured widely in Mediterranean cuisine. Therefore, enjoying Mediterranean dishes is one way of getting more lycopene in your diet.

Consider what you’ve learned about Mediterranean cuisine as you answer the questions that follow.

Activity Questions:

1. Think about Spanish gazpacho and tomato soup typically served in the United States. Assuming both recipes call for the same amount of tomatoes, why might the lycopene values differ?

2. How do you think the lycopene value of a Northern Italian diet would compare to the lycopene value of a Southern Italian diet? Why might the values differ?
3. Greek cooks use tomatoes in a variety of dishes. These dishes include skewered broiled tomatoes, stews flavored with tomatoes, and salads tossed with tomatoes. Assuming the same amount of tomatoes is used in all three dishes, how would these dishes compare in terms of lycopene value? Why might the values differ?

4. If you wanted to increase the lycopene value of your family’s diet, which Mediterranean dish would you prepare and why?