

The East London Garden Society

Plant Facts

Chilli Peppers



Capsicum fruits, also known as red pepper or chilli pepper, have been a part of human diets since about 7,500 BC and are one of the oldest cultivated crops in the Americas. The origins of cultivating chilli peppers are traced to north eastern Mexico some 6,000 years ago. They were one of the first self-pollinating crops cultivated in Mexico, Central America, and parts of South America

Researchers from Cleveland Clinic in Ohio reviewed health records of more than 570,000 people from four large studies and found that compared to those who rarely or never ate chilli peppers, those who ate them on a regular basis reduced their risk of death from heart-related sources by 26%, from cancer by 23% and from all causes of mortality by 25%.

This reduction in the potential risk of death is significant and could make an impact on the number of people with heart disease and cancer. An American Heart Association report released in January 2019 found 48% of adults in America had cardiovascular disease.

You may find chilli peppers in your favourite foods. Preliminary data presented at the American Heart Association virtual conference titled 'Scientific Sessions 2020' suggest that those who regularly eat chilli peppers could have a longer life.

Senior author Dr Bo Xu commented, "It highlights that dietary factors may play an important role in overall health." Xu, a cardiologist at Cleveland Clinic, went on to say in a press release:

"We were surprised to find that in these previously published studies, regular consumption of chilli pepper was associated with an overall risk-reduction of all-cause, cardiovascular disease and cancer mortality. The exact reasons and mechanisms that might explain our findings, though, are currently unknown.

Therefore, it is impossible to conclusively say that eating more chilli pepper can prolong life and reduce deaths, especially from cardiovascular factors or cancer. More research, especially evidence from randomized controlled studies, is needed to confirm these preliminary findings."

Xu cautioned there were several limitations, including that the four studies only had limited information on health data and confounding factors that may have influenced the results. He also noted the amounts and types of chilli pepper the participants ate during the studies were also different. The researchers are continuing to analyse the data and plan to publish the literature review.

Chilli pepper is a fruit pod belonging to the nightshade family. Other members of the family include tomato, potato, aubergine, cayenne pepper and paprika. The plant is a perennial shrub that grows up to 3.2 feet in height and is native to Central America.

Capsaicin is concentrated in the seeds and the inner white membrane found when you cut the pod open. The plant produces capsaicin as a protection against fungal attack. Peppers with more capsaicin are spicier and hotter. While it is colourless and odourless, it tricks your brain into perceiving heat where it touches your body.

This burning sensation is what you experience when you eat the peppers, as it is not a taste. Instead, the compound stimulates nerves that send two messages to the brain of warmth and intense stimulation. The burning sensation is a combination of these two messages.

Although the benefits of foods that contain capsaicin are plentiful, eating chilli peppers is not a cure-all and some people cannot tolerate the compound or the flavour.

In another study, after twelve weeks of supplementation, participants were found to eat less and had a reduction in their waist-to-hip ratio. While not a magic bullet, chilli peppers may be one weapon you can add to your arsenal of healthy food and lifestyle choices that help you take control of your health.