

WATERCRESS MAY STOP GROWTH OF CANCER CELLS



Eating a portion of watercress every day could help protect against cancer, according to new research.

Scientists at Southampton University found that volunteers who ate 80 grams of watercress a day – the equivalent of a single vegetable portion – had elevated levels of cancer-fighting molecules in their blood within hours of eating the salad leaves.

Extracts from crushed watercress were also shown to inhibit the growth of breast cancer cells.

Watercress is the latest in a long line of so called 'superfoods' that have been found to have protective health effects.

The research, led by Professor Graham Packham from the Cancer Research UK centre at Southampton University, is reported in the *British Journal of Nutrition* and was funded by the Watercress Alliance, a body which represents UK growers.

The study authors said that chemicals found in

watercress, known as isothiocyanates, appeared to interfere with the growth of cancer cells.

They said: "This pilot study suggests that dietary intake of watercress may be sufficient to modulate this potential anti-cancer pathway."

They said that further work needed to be done with larger numbers of patients to confirm their results.

The findings build on studies that have shown people who eat watercress and other vegetables rich in isothiocyanates, such as broccoli and cabbage, are at lower risk of developing cancer.

Hazel Nunn, health information manager at Cancer Research UK, said: "Watercress may well have benefits but there's no reason to believe that it should be superior to a generally healthy, balanced diet that is high in fibre, vegetables and fruit and low in red and processed meat, salt, saturated fat and alcohol."

RICHARD GRAY



A salad with watercress could help to prevent breast cancer

● A simple salad could prevent the onset of breast cancer, thanks to the health-boosting properties of watercress, scientists have claimed.

Eating a single portion of watercress can increase the number of cancer-fighting molecules in the bloodstream within hours and may prevent the condition from developing, researchers said.

Watercress could also stop the

recurrence of the disease in recovering breast cancer sufferers, the report from the University of Southampton claimed.

Volunteers who ate 80 gram of watercress per day regularly were found to have significant health benefits.

In 2007, there were 45,972 new cases of breast cancer diagnosed in the UK, according to Cancer Research UK.

EAT MORE... WATERCRESS

ADD handfuls of watercress to soups and salads to boost your immune system. It contains more vitamin C than oranges, more calcium than milk and more iron than spinach.

It is also rich in glucosinolates, compounds which fight carcinogens (cancer-causing agents).

Three to five portions a week can suppress breast cancer cell development, a recent British study found.



Watercress – the garnish that fights breast cancer



WILD BUNCH: Watercress is a natural way to combat a wide range of diseases

Watercress is often placed to the side of a plate as a decorative garnish, but it has been revered for its health properties for centuries, writes *Jill Foster*.

The father of medicine, Hippocrates, is believed to have located his first hospital close to a freshwater stream to have a ready supply of the plant, while 17th Century herbalist Culpeper claimed it could cleanse the blood. It was used to 'cure' ailments such as baldness, hiccups and even freckles.

While these health claims may be debatable, watercress is packed with 15 essential vitamins and minerals. Now, scientists believe a daily dose may help combat breast cancer.

This month, researchers at Southampton University discovered that within hours of

eating 3oz of watercress a day – about a full cereal bowl – a small group of breast cancer survivors had a higher level of cancer-fighting molecules in their blood.

They found the compound phenethyl isothiocyanate – which gives watercress its peppery taste – blocks the hypoxia-inducible factor protein which helps cancer tumours grow.

They also found watercress helps 'turn off' the signals that cancer cells send out asking the body for more blood and oxygen.

Professor Graham Packham, who led the research, said: 'I was surprised that eating one portion produced significant levels of this compound in the blood. It has the potential to have the same effect with other cancers.'

In fact, this is not the first time

watercress – whose Latin name means 'nose-twister' – has been found to combat cancer.

In 2007, Irish scientists revealed that a daily portion reduced DNA damage to blood cells, considered an important trigger in the development of cancer. The trial involved 60 healthy men and women who ate 3oz of fresh watercress every day for eight weeks. They found that in addition to reducing DNA damage, the cress also increased the ability of cells to resist damage from free radicals.

But its cancer-preventative properties are not the only benefit. 'Watercress is full of nutrients including iron, calcium and Vitamin A and C,' says dietician Katie Peck. 'It is low in sodium and high in water, so it is very low in calories.'

It is an excellent source of natural phytonutrients, substances in plants that have antioxidant properties such as isothiocyanates, flavonoids and carotenoids. It also contains folate, which helps maintain normal blood levels of homocysteine (high levels are associated with an increased coronary heart disease risk) as well as decreasing the risk of neural tube defects such as spina bifida.

Consultant dietician Sian Porter says: 'Watercress also contains lutein, a carotenoid which is a plant component that provides the deep orange, yellow and red colours in fruit and vegetables. They have a role in helping to stay healthy and keep heart disease, cancer and macular degeneration at bay.'