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# Orange Crunch

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Consumption of carrots  
lowers the risk  
of prostate cancer.

Carrots protect  
against cardiovascular  
disease.

## Orange Crunch

BY WINSTON J. CRAIG

**Y**ou were probably told by your mother to eat your carrots because they are good for you. Why did carrots get this reputation? What health-promoting properties do they have?

Carrots originated in Afghanistan and were cultivated first in the Middle East as medicinal plants. They belong to the *Umbelliferae* family that includes anise, celery, dill, fennel and parsley. They were not always a bright orange; that was developed by Dutch growers over 400 years ago. Today, carrots have been bred to be sweet and crunchy, bright orange in color, and rich in carotenoids.

Originally, carrots were purple, red, yellow and white in color. These highly-pigmented, rainbow-colored carrots are making a comeback today. They appear in some specialty stores and farmer's markets. The red pigment is lycopene (as in tomatoes), the purple comes from anthocyanins (as in many berries), while the yellow is due to xanthophylls (as in squash). These pigments are all antioxidants that provide us with protection against cancer.

A serving of carrots (a half-cup of chopped carrots) contains only 25 calories and very little fat or sodium. Carrots contain useful amounts of vitamin K, potassium, folate, biotin, vitamin C and manganese. They contain very high levels of beta-carotene and other carotenoids, making them an excellent source of vitamin A. Carrots provide useful amounts of soluble fiber, touted for its cholesterol-lowering and blood glucose-modifying properties. Animal studies have linked eating carrots with lower rates of glaucoma and cataracts. A large Dutch study revealed daily carrot consumption associated with a 32 percent lower risk of heart disease.

Carrots contain a number of phytonutrients beyond the carotenoids. They include polyacetylenes such as falcarinol and falcarindiol. These compounds have anti-inflammatory



properties and beneficial cardiovascular properties. Cooking the carrots makes the phytonutrients more readily absorbed.

Regular consumption of carrots protects against both colorectal and prostate cancer. Their phytonutrients both kill and retard the growth of leukemia and other cancer cells. Smokers who do not consume carrots are at three times greater risk of lung cancer than those who eat carrots regularly. Foods like carrots that are rich in carotenoids, such as lutein, help maintain normal vision by preventing macular degeneration of the eye. Carotenoids also help improve immune

function.

Carrots are very versatile. They can be eaten raw, steamed, boiled or roasted, and chopped and added to soups and stews. Shredded carrots can be used in coleslaw, stir fry, salads or sandwich wraps. Because of their sweet flavor, they also can be added to cakes and muffins. Carrot sticks or baby carrots are popular as snacks and often used with hummus and other dips.

In contrast to what you may expect, larger carrots are sweeter than small ones because they have had longer time to develop sugars. Carrots should be stored away from foods like apples and potatoes that release ethylene gas, which turns the carrots bitter. While eating kale is the popular trend of today, why not try some rainbow carrots that provide a collage of color.

Winston J. Craig, Ph.D., RD, is a professor emeritus of nutrition at Andrews University. He lives in Walla Walla, Washington.