Study Reinforces Antioxidant Benefits of Tart Cherries

April 23, 2009

Eating just one-and-a-half servings of tart cherries could considerably increase antioxidant activity in the body, according to new University of Michigan research reported at the 2009 Experimental Biology meeting in New Orleans. In the study, healthy adults who ate a cup-and-a-half of frozen cherries had higher levels of antioxidants, specifically five separate anthocyanins, the natural antioxidants that give cherries their red color.

Twelve healthy adults, aged 18 to 25 years, were randomly given either one-and-a-half cups or three cups of frozen tart cherries to eat. Analysis of participants' blood and urine at regular intervals after they ate the cherries revealed increased antioxidant activity for up to 12 hours after the fruit was consumed.

"This study documents for the first time that the antioxidants in tart cherries do make it into the human bloodstream, and is coupled with increased antioxidant activity that could have a positive impact," said Sara L. Warber, M.D., co-director of the University of Michigan Integrative Medicine and principal investigator of the study. "And, while more research is needed, what's really great is that a reasonable amount of cherries could potentially deliver benefits, like reducing risk factors for heart disease and inflammation."

Previous animal studies have uncovered a connection between cherries and cherry compounds and key health benefits, including helping to lower risk factors for heart disease and lowering inflammation. Warber's colleagues at the University of Michigan have previously shown in animals that cherry-enriched diets can lower blood cholesterol levels and reduce triglycerides, an unhealthy type of blood fat. Additional benefits of cherries found in animal studies include a 14 percent lower body weight and less "belly fat," which is linked to increased risk of heart disease and type 2 diabetes.

The human study was funded by the Cherry Marketing Institute, a Lansing, Mich.-based organization funded by North American tart cherry growers and processors.