

Pomegranates are being hailed as a super-food which can protect the heart.

Scientists in Israel have shown that drinking a daily glass of the fruit's juice can reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease.

"Pomegranate juice contains the highest antioxidant capacity compared to other juices, red wine and green tea," said Professor Michael Aviram, who led the team.

This is good news, for antioxidants are the naturally occurring substances in plants that protect the body from free radicals - 'bad' chemicals in the blood.

Free radicals alter cholesterol in a process known as oxidation, which is thought to speed up the hardening of the arteries.

In studies at the Rambam Medical Center in Haifa , the juice of the fruit was found to slow down cholesterol oxidation by almost half, and reduce the retention of LDL.

That is the 'bad' cholesterol which forms atherosclerotic lesions, the fatty deposits which narrow the arteries and lead to heart disease.

"Antioxidants can protect us against the oxidative stress in our industrialised world, such as pollution, chemicals, viruses and bacteria, and consequently cardiovascular diseases and cancer," said Professor Aviram.

The theme is being taken up by a team at London 's Hammersmith Hospital , who are launching a study to see if they can replicate the Haifa findings.

Their work will focus on people whose arteries are currently healthy.

Researcher Dr Richard Bogle said the fruit contained polyphenolics, tannins and anthocyanins - all compounds that could have a beneficial effect.

Dr Bogle said: "This study will test the idea that drinking a glass of pomegranate juice every day improves the function of blood vessels, reduces hardening of the arteries and improves heart health."

"Preliminary studies suggest that pomegranate juice may contain almost three times the total antioxidant ability compared to the same quantity of green tea or red wine."