THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A CANCER-BUSTING SUPERFOOD

BLUEBERRIES contain powerful compounds that can protect against cancer. Green juice and celery smoothies can even fight – and reverse – the disease. These tales are undeniably appealing because they seem so simple. But the truth is that superfoods for cancer do not exist.

At best, their virtues are at least rooted in scientific theory – but they are exaggerated. Take those blueberries, for example. Scientists in the United States discovered that they contained anthocyanins, a compound thought to have anti-cancer properties which helps clear out toxins, fights damaging compounds in the body and reduces inflammation.

A Californian study in 2013 found that feeding mice with a diet which was five per cent powdered blueberry reduced the size of their cancer tumours. And last year, another US team reported that human cancer cells reduced by 25 per cent in the laboratory when exposed to blueberry extract. Chemical compounds extracted from, or similar to, those found in blueberries and various other vegetables are being made into cancer drugs, and studied.

It all certainly sounds impressive. But none of this proves that consuming even large amounts of blueberries every single day of your life will prevent cancer. Indeed, animal studies often use implausibly high amounts of a compound, which can’t be replicated through diet and may even be harmful.

Gunter Kuhnle, professor of food and nutritional sciences at Reading University, says: ‘If you put anything on cancer cells they tend to die. I’ve been to a conference where someone poured a can of coke on to cancer cells and, surprise surprise, they died.’

There have been studies that reported that people who included a lot of berries in their diet had marginally lower cancer rates.

However, Prof Kuhnle is highly sceptical, saying: ‘In many populations where they’re studied, berries are expensive. So you’re looking at people who can afford them. These people are wealthier and healthier in general – and we know that has a big influence on cancer.’

According to Prof Louis Levy, of Public Health England: ‘If you take in a lot of these so-called superfoods, all you’re doing is enriching the drainage system of the UK with antioxidants, because your system will just flush them out.’