

Olive Oil: From the Fruit of Life

Olive oil is an integral part of the "Mediterranean diet" which is associated with sensible tasty portions and slower, more enjoyable eating. People who eat a "Mediterranean diet" have been shown to have a remarkable variety of health benefits.

Lowers Cholesterol and Prevents Heart Disease

Studies have shown that eating a Mediterranean diet with a high consumption of olive oil reduces the risk of developing heart disease. According to a 2005 study, olive oil lowers total cholesterol and LDL (bad) cholesterol while raising HDL (good) cholesterol levels in patients. (*J Am Diet Assoc.* 2005;105:1080-6.)

In fact, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has approved olive oil as a "heart friendly" food. The FDA allows the following health claim to be added to any olive oil label: "Scientific evidence suggests that eating about 2 tablespoons (23 grams) of olive oil daily may reduce the risk of coronary heart disease due to the monounsaturated fat in olive oil".

Lowers Blood Pressure

There is evidence that olive oil can also benefit heart health by lowering blood pressure, therefore reducing the risk for heart attack or stroke. A large cohort study published in *Public Health Nutrition* found that after 28 months of strictly following a Mediterranean diet rich in olive oil, 171 men had lowered blood pressure by 27% and lowered risk of coronary heart disease. (*Public Health Nutr.* 2006 Apr;9(2):251-7.)

Breast and Colon Cancer Prevention

Research has found that the monounsaturated fat found in olive oil may reduce the risk of colon cancer and breast cancer. A recent study published in *Clinical Translation Oncology* found that specific fatty acids found in olive oil actually stop cancer genes found in the body from switching on. These cancer genes are responsible for producing about 20% of the breast cancers and colon cancers that are diagnosed. (*Clin Transl Oncol.* 2006 Jan;8(1):15-21.)

Osteoporosis Prevention

Olive oil consumption assists in the maintenance of bone density and may protect against osteoporosis. A study confirmed that in the Mediterranean population, consumption of monounsaturated fat and physical activity was predictive of increased bone mineral density as compared to Northern European populations. (*Prev Med.* 1997 May-Jun;26(3):395-400.)

Arthritis and Anti-inflammation

It has long been suspected that olive oil inhibits inflammation. The presence of anti-inflammatory activity in olive oil might help explain why its use has been linked to heart disease prevention and improvements in people with arthritis.

In a study of eighteen patients with rheumatoid arthritis, supplementing with about 4 teaspoons per day of olive oil for 12 weeks reduced pain and morning stiffness and improved laboratory measures of disease activity. (*Ann Rheum.* 1989;48(2):124-7.)

Recently, a substance, oleocanthal, found only in extra virgin oil oil has been found that exhibits anti-inflammatory properties. Oleocanthal has been found to have anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties. Similar to classical NSAIDs like ibuprofen, it is a non-selective inhibitor of an inflammation pathway cyclooxygenase (COX).

Summary

The health benefits of olive oil as part of the Mediterranean diet have been documented for almost fifty years. Researchers have described strikingly low rates of coronary heart disease in the Mediterranean region, where fat intake was relatively high but largely from olive oil.