

Another Reason to Love Olive Oil

It's no news that omega-3 fatty acid and phenolic-rich olive oil is good for your heart. However, the virtues of olive oil seem now to extend into the rest of the body as well, according to new research. Noting that the incidence of breast, large bowel, ovary and prostate cancer is lower in Mediterranean countries than in Northern Europe -- and that the association between olive oil and cancer reduction has been established -- researchers wondered whether olive oil with higher amounts of phenolic compounds may be even more protective.

WHAT'S HEALTHY ABOUT OLIVE OIL?

Researchers believed it was probably the phenolic compounds -- healthful plant compounds, abundant in olive oil -- that were delivering the cancer-fighting benefits, so they tested three different olive oils with three different phenolic concentrations -- high, medium and low. For the study, they divided 182 healthy European men between 20 and 60 years old, from five different countries (Denmark, Finland, Germany, Italy and Spain) into three groups. Each group consumed 25 milliliters (0.84 oz.) of one kind of the olive oils at a time. After three weeks on each of the three olive oils, with a two-week washout period in between, their urine was tested for presence of a substance (8oxodG) considered a reliable measure of oxidative damage.

It turned out to not even matter which kind of olive oil the men had been consuming, since all had noticeably reduced measures of 8oxodG. It seems to have been the olive oil itself that had made the difference, regardless of phenol content. "It is likely the monounsaturated fat in the olive oil is the protective element," one of the study's co-authors, Henrik Poulsen, MD, professor of clinical pharmacology, Rigshospitalet, University Hospital, Copenhagen, Denmark, told me, since it is known to have anti-inflammatory properties. Dr. Poulsen speculates that other oils high in monounsaturated fat, such as macadamia nut oil and almond oil, may be cancer-protective as well, though this study only examined olive oil.

EXTRA VIRGIN WORTH EXTRA INVESTMENT

Phenolic compounds are always touted as one of the virtues of extra-virgin olive oil, since they are better preserved than in the other, less expensive olive oils. I asked Dr. Poulsen if there was any benefit to paying the higher price for these. Yes, he said, the extra virgin olive oil is worth the extra investment. Not only is it subject to the least processing and heat exposure, but it also works harder for your health than regular or light olive oils. "Our other research shows that the high phenolic content of extra virgin olive oil is what's protective against arteriosclerosis," he told me. "Extra virgin olive oil gives you the best of both worlds."

Source(s):

Henrik Poulsen, MD, professor of clinical pharmacology and the head of the department of clinical pharmacology at Rigshospitalet, University Hospital, Copenhagen, Denmark.