

Olive oil

Page content: Olive oil contributes nutrients to the diet and may also reduce your risk of developing chronic diseases.

Choosing extra virgin olive oil as your main source of dietary fat is good for your health. When eaten as part of a healthy, well-balanced diet – high in fruits, vegetables and wholegrain breads and cereals – olive oil is thought to have a positive impact on a person's health. It not only contributes nutrients to the diet, but may also reduce your risk of developing chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease and cancer. It may also increase your life expectancy.

The Mediterranean diet

Olive oil is a major component of the 'Mediterranean diet'. Research shows that people living in Mediterranean regions have reduced risk for certain chronic diseases and longer life expectancy, compared with other groups of people in the world. This is despite their high dietary fat intake, which usually makes up a large proportion of their total energy intake (more than 30 per cent).

A famous study carried out in the 1950s showed there were differences in the patterns of disease occurring among Mediterranean populations compared with those living in northern Europe and North America. This was thought to be related to diet. Over the next 30 years, investigators also found that the Mediterranean diet was associated with low rates of degenerative diseases, such as cardiovascular disease (CVD) and certain types of cancers, as well as increased life expectancy.

Research supports the health benefits of olive oil

Scientific study of the incidence, control and spread of disease in a range of population groups supports the popular interest in olive oil as a healthy food. Its chemical components have been extensively studied to help understand how they might protect our health. Olive oil is thought to not only contribute nutrients to the diet, but also to have a positive impact on health.

The Mediterranean diet and consumption of olive oil is associated with a low incidence of cardiovascular disease (CVD). The Lyon Diet Heart Study reported lower rates of coronary recurrence in people who consumed a Mediterranean diet. Other studies have focused specifically on olive oil and show that use of olive oil may reduce cardiovascular risk factors by decreasing plasma triglycerides, total and low density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol, platelet activation, inflammation and oxidative damage. It is also thought to increase high density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol and antioxidant status.

Research suggests that olive oil may also have a role in lowering the risk of several types of cancers, including breast, colon, lung, ovarian and skin cancers. Chemical compounds specific to olive oil, known as phenolics, appear to combat the build-up of free radicals in the body and may be able to reduce oxidative damage to DNA.

A number of studies have shown that olive oil may also help reduce or manage blood pressure, obesity, rheumatoid arthritis and immune function.

Types of olive oil

Olive oil is produced by the pressing or crushing of olive fruit. It comes in different grades, depending on the amount of processing involved. There are unrefined (virgin) grades and refined grades. The less refinement by heat and chemical treatments, the higher the quality of the oil. Virgin varieties of olive oil are believed to offer the greatest health benefits as they retain most of the nutrients from the olive fruit.

Varieties include:

- **Extra virgin** - this oil is the top grade of olive oil. It is made from the first 'pressing' of good-quality olives. The oil is removed (extracted) by a traditional cold-pressing method, where no chemicals and only a small amount of heat are applied.
- **Virgin** - this oil is produced from the second pressing of olives or from the second-best grade of olives by cold-pressing. No chemicals are involved and very little heat is used.

- **Pure** - also sold as 'pure' olive oil. This type of oil is non-virgin, commercial-grade olive oil. It is 'pure' to the extent that it consists only of olive oil. In fact, it consists of the inferior oil that is left after the virgin oil has been removed from lower-quality olives. This oil is then refined using heat, chemical solvents, high pressure and filtration treatments. Finally, it is mixed with a small quantity of virgin olive oil to restore colour and flavour.
- **Light and extra light** - these oils are produced from the last pressing of olives. They are more refined and of a lower quality than the other grades. There is little of the natural olive flavour and colour left in these oils.

Where to get help

- An accredited practising dietitian, contact the Dietitians Association of Australia
- A registered nutritionist or registered public health nutritionist
- Your doctor

Things to remember

- Choose olive oil as your main source of dietary fat.
- Swapping to olive oil as part of a healthy, well-balanced diet of fruits, vegetables, wholegrain breads and cereals may reduce your risk of developing some chronic diseases.
- Virgin varieties of olive oil are thought to offer the greatest health benefits as they retain most of the nutrients from the olive fruit.
- Locally produced olive oil is better than imported because it is kept in storage for less time. Prolonged storage can degrade some of the olive oil's nutrients.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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