
Olive oil

Choosing extra virgin olive oil as your main source of dietary oil or fat, as well as eating a healthy and balanced diet high in fruits, vegetables and whole grain breads and cereals, may reduce your risk of chronic disease development and also increase life expectancy.

The Mediterranean diet

Olive oil is a major component in the Mediterranean diet. Evidence shows that Mediterranean populations have reduced risk for certain chronic diseases and extended life expectancy compared with other populations in the world, despite their high dietary fat intake, which is usually in excess of 30 per cent of their total energy intake.

A famous study carried out in the 1950s highlighted differences in diseases that occurred between Mediterranean populations and those living in northern Europe and North America, and compared their diets. Over 30 years, it was found that the Mediterranean diet was associated with low rates of conditions like cardiovascular disease (CVD) and certain types of cancers, as well as increased life expectancy.

The health benefits of olive oil

Clinical studies focusing on olive oil show that consumption 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, and increase high density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol and antioxidant status.

Studies have also shown that olive oil consumption may have a protective role on breast, colon, lung, ovarian and skin cancer development. Compounds specific to olive oil, known as phenolics, seem to possess free radical-scavenging properties and so may be able to reduce oxidative damage to DNA.

A number of studies have also shown that olive oil may have additional beneficial effects on 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 the oil is refined 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 considered to be the premium grade of olive oil. It is made from the first pressing of olives. The oil is extracted by the 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, without use of chemicals and use of little heat.

- **Olive oil** – Also marketed as ‘pure’ olive oil. This type of oil is non-virgin, commercial-grade olive oil. It is ‘pure’ olive oil to the extent that it consists only of olive oil. This grade of olive oil consists of the inferior oil that is a result of subsequent pressings after the virgin oil has been extracted from lower-quality olives. This oil then undergoes a refining process involving heat, chemical solvents, high pressure and filtration treatments. This oil is then 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 lower quality than the other grades. There is little of the natural olive flavour and colour in these oils.