

New Year's resolution No. 1: Prevent cancer, use olive oil.

December 11 2006

If you want to avoid developing cancer, then you might want to add eating more olive oil to your list of New Year's resolutions. In a study to be published in the January 2007 issue of The FASEB Journal, scientists from five European countries describe how the anti-cancer effects of olive oil may account for the significant difference in cancer rates among Northern and Southern Europeans.

The authors drew this conclusion based on the outcomes of volunteers from Denmark, Finland, Germany, Italy, and Spain, who consumed 25 milliliters (a little less than a quarter cup) of olive oil every day for three weeks. During this time, the researchers examined urine samples of the subjects for specific compounds known to be waste by-products of oxidative damage to cells, a precursor to cancer. At the beginning of the trial, the presence of these waste by-products was much higher in Northern European subjects than their Southern European counterparts. By the end of three weeks, however, the presence of this compound in Northern European subjects was substantially reduced.

"Determining the health benefits of any particular food is challenging because of it involves relatively large numbers of people over significant periods of time," said lead investigator Henrik E. Poulsen, M.D. of Rigshospitalet, Denmark. "In our study, we overcame these challenges by measuring how olive oil affected the oxidation of our genes, which is closely linked to development of disease. This approach allows us to determine if olive oil or any other food makes a difference. Our findings must be confirmed, but every piece of evidence so far points to olive oil

being a healthy food. By the way, it also tastes great."

Another interesting finding in the study suggests that researchers are just beginning to unlock the mysteries of this ancient "health food."

Specifically, the researchers found evidence that the phenols in olive oil are not the only compounds that reduced oxidative damage. Phenols are known antioxidant compounds that are present in a wide range of everyday foods, such as dark chocolate, red wine, tea, fruits, and vegetables. Despite reducing the level of phenols in the olive oil, the study's subjects still showed that they were receiving the same level of health benefits.

"Every New Year people make resolutions that involve eating less fat to improve their health," said Gerald Weissmann, MD, Editor-in-Chief of The FASEB Journal. "This academically sound, practically useful study shows that what you eat is just as important as how much you eat. No wonder Plato taught wisdom in an olive grove called Academe."

Source: Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology

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