



HEALTH BENEFITS OF OLIVE OIL

It is well known that the Mediterranean diet lowers the risk of major illnesses such as heart disease, diabetes, stroke and cancer. It also helps prevent Alzheimer's disease and improves longevity.

The Mediterranean diet is typically high in fibre because of the emphasis on legumes, whole grains, fruit and vegetables. There is little red meat and plenty of fish. It also includes a high intake of olive oil, which is the component we want to look at more closely in this article.

Ingredients of olive oil

The important components of olives and olive oil that are most likely to give health benefits are the high levels of mono-unsaturated fatty acids and the polyphenol compounds.

When it comes to diseases and risk, it is not the total fat content of the diet that is important, but rather the type of fat. Diets that are high in mono-unsaturated fatty acids confer health benefits as opposed to those that contain polyunsaturated fats. The Mediterranean diet has a high fat content, with olive oil providing around 85% of this content. Most of it is oleic acid. The Mediterranean diet has no trans fats like those found in processed foods, so there is no damage to arteries and cholesterol molecules are protected.

Polyphenol compounds are molecules that contain several carbon ring structures called phenols. These include tyrosinol, hydroxytyrosinol and oleuropein, which have numerous protective actions.

Olive oil includes:

- Oleic acid
- Carotenoids – beta-carotene, lutein
- Phenols – especially important are hydroxytyrosinol and oleuropein
- Smaller amounts of phenols – including caffeic and vanillic acid
- Squalene – antioxidant in skin against UV rays
- Vitamin E

Health benefits of virgin olive oil

The benefits of virgin olive oil on health suggested by scientific studies include:

- Reduces triglycerides (bad cholesterol)
- Increases HDL (good cholesterol)
- Lowers LDL cholesterol (bad cholesterol) when it replaces saturated animal fat in diets
- Increases resistance of LDL to oxidation (damage that leads to disease)

- Improves glucose handling by the body in diabetes
- Improves dilation of arteries
- Reduces inflammation caused by eating saturated animal fats
- Reduces activity of monocytes (immune cells that participate in creating atherosclerosis)
- Reduces blood pressure
- Reduces abnormal heart rhythms
- Reduces rheumatoid arthritis via its anti-inflammatory effect
- Reduces blood platelet clumping (which can clot the blood), thus reducing the risk of attack and stroke
- Reduces clotting factors in the blood
- Acts as an antioxidant to prevent oxidation damage to tissues (oxidation and inflammation are behind all tissue damage, heart disease, stroke, cancer, etc.)
- Lowers incidence of cancer of the breast, bowel, prostate, pancreas and uterus
- Reduces inflammation.

What to look for when choosing olive oil

When you are looking for olive oil, make sure you choose "virgin olive oil" or "extra virgin olive oil" which have similar beneficial components.

The product called "olive oil" contains a small percentage of virgin olive oil (5-10%) which is added to previously refined olive oil. The result is that there are fewer beneficial ingredients compared with virgin olive oil.

How much olive oil to eat

Being from Mediterranean stock myself, I usually advise people to use olive oil on all salads and in cooking. I also suggest drizzling olive oil and lemon juice onto steamed vegetables.

The American Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has authorized the use of health claims for olive oil. An FDA report states that a dose of two teaspoons (23g) daily as a replacement for the same amount of saturated animal fat can reduce the risk of coronary heart disease.

Adoption of the Mediterranean diet with its fruit and vegetables, little red meat and plenty of fish, whole grains, legumes and, of course, olive oil and olives (especially black ones) increases one's life expectancy and prevents many diseases.