

Extra virgin olive oil and health

People with diets including daily consumption extra virgin olive oil (EVOO) have lower rates of most chronic diseases, such as heart disease, cancers, arthritis, and type 2 diabetes. EVOO has been shown to decrease a number of risk factors for chronic diseases. Some of the risk factors prevented by extra virgin olive oil are:

Oxidation. Excessive oxidation increases the risk of heart disease, cancer, and general aging. The main type of fat in vegetable oils, polyunsaturated fat, encourages oxidation. In contrast, EVOO contains a rich amount of monounsaturated fat, preventing oxidation. EVOO also contains a number of phenols that act as antioxidants which will lower oxidation. EVOO with a high phenolic content has been shown to decrease LDL oxidation (1) as well as DNA oxidation (2). Impeding the oxidation of LDL and DNA will respectively lower the risk of heart disease and prevents the initiation of cancers.

Blood levels of fasting insulin and glucose. Higher blood levels of both insulin and glucose have been related to an increased risk of heart disease and several types of cancer. Two tablespoons of EVOO a day has been shown to decrease blood levels of glucose and insulin (3). Besides decreasing your risk of heart disease and cancer, EVOO also improves blood glucose control for diabetics.

Blood pressure. Two to 3 tablespoons of EVOO a day has been shown to lower blood pressure (4). EVOO with higher phenol content has been shown to lower systolic blood pressure in men compared to olive oil with lower phenol content (5).

Inflammation. When high levels of inflammation are measured in the blood in conjunction with illnesses like heart disease or cancer, the outcome of the disease has been less favorable. Found in some EVOO, oleocanthal is a natural anti-inflammatory agent (6) and causes the “burning” sensation when we swallow olive oil. It works like ibuprofen to limit the production of inflammatory compounds in the body. When studied in a test tube, it has also been shown to kill cancer cells selectively (7). Future studies will determine if it can kill cancer cells in humans.

Blood coagulation. Blood that clots easily will increase your risk of heart disease and cerebral vascular accidents (strokes). EVOO high in phenols has been shown to decrease blood from clotting (8).

Body weight. There may be some concern that because “olive oil is a fat” consuming it often will lead to weight gain. However, patients who used EVOO as part of a weight loss program lost more weight than when they went on a low-fat diet (9). Other studies have shown that people who use EVOO as their main dietary fat also tend to have a lower body weight (10) and gain less weight over time (11). A meal containing fat leads to satiety, causing us to stop eating because the meal has satisfied us. Additionally, meals containing fat extend the length of time it takes us to get hungry again for our next meal. In this way, using extra virgin olive oil helps control body weight.

The health benefits of EVOO start at about 2 tablespoons a day and many studies show that the benefits increase with higher intakes. A good way to use EVOO is to prepare vegetables with them or use on a

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salad using 1 tablespoon of EVOO per cup of vegetables. Although extra virgin olive oil costs more than vegetable seed oil, if we consider the price per tablespoon, then it ends up being not as expensive. Meals made with extra virgin olive oil, vegetables and a starch-like, pasta, rice, or potatoes-cost less than those that contain even small amounts of meat (11). Plus, how can you pass up the almost infinite health benefits of extra virgin olive oil? It is more medicine than food!

Just because an olive oil product has been listed as “extra virgin,” however, does not mean it truly contains extra virgin olive oil. For extensive information on olive oil and consumer misinformation, please go to: www.truthinoliveoil.com. This website was created by Tom Mueller, author of the book *Extra Virginity* (2012), a “must-read” for anyone who interested in olive oil. It provides extensive information on how to find out if an olive oil is authentically extra virgin as well as where to buy it.

EVOO from California has a more likely chance of being pure than olive oil from another country. One widely available brand is “California Olive Ranch.” It has great value as well as wonderful taste. You can also buy fresh EVOO in some RI stores that give you the varietal type, country of origin, and chemical analysis. The chemical analysis includes at least the total phenol content. Some analysis will provide the specific phenols. Not all “boutique” olive oil stores carry authentic olive oil. The price of the oil does not guarantee that you are purchasing EVOO. Veronica Foods (VF) is a major reputable distributor of olive oil to stores that specialize in EVOO. Any store that purchases from VF is carrying EVOO. VF stores in RI:

Olive del Mondo, 815 Hope St. Providence, 02906. 401.383.5733
Aged and Virgin, 395 Thames St, Newport, 02840. 401.849.3029

For recipes that follow a plant-based, olive oil diet:
www.medfooddiet.com or *The Pink Ribbon Diet* Flynn and Barr. DaCapo Press. 2010.

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