

Mediterranean Diet Offers Lifelong Health

by Zachary Young

Research reconfirms the many health benefits of olives and the traditional Mediterranean diet

According to ancient Greek history, the olive tree first appeared as a gift to the city of Athens from Athena, the goddess of peace. Since, the olive has remained deeply rooted and rich in history—from wreaths of olives crowning champions at the first Olympic games to the biblical sacredness of olive oil, the olive has endured a long history as a symbol of endurance and wisdom. Additionally, the olive has long played a major role in the extraordinary health of the Mediterranean people—making the olive a symbol of lifelong health.

Recently, scientists and other researchers have determined that olives and olive oil are a key component in the Mediterranean diet. This diet is characterized by high amounts of plant-based foods such as vegetables, fruits, legumes, bread, pasta, and nuts; small amounts of red meat; moderate amounts of wine; and olive oil as the principal source of fat. Between 30 and 35 percent of fat calories in this diet are derived from olive oil.

The benefits of olive oil are attributed primarily to the high level of oleic acid as well as the powerful phenolic antioxidants which are specific to olives alone. While most of the recent focus has been on olives, the true power of the Mediterranean diet must be attributed to the highly potent combination of antioxidants from olives, wine, fruit, and vegetables that work synergistically together. The antioxidants, especially proanthocyanadins from wine and polyphenols from olive oil, in addition to vitamin E and vitamin C, have been shown to decrease incidences of disease including coronary heart disease and cancer.

Currently, coronary heart disease (CHD) is the leading cause of death in industrialized nations—accounting for 7.2 million deaths a year. During the Seven Country Study it was found that CHD was closely related to dietary lifestyles. Those groups that followed a Mediterranean diet with olive oil as the primary source of fat had the longest lifespan and the lowest incidence of CHD and cancers.

Additional studies in U.S. and European populations have clearly shown that diets “rich in complex carbohydrates and fiber and whose fat source is primarily monounsaturated fatty acids, as found in the olive oil-rich Mediterranean-style diet..., lowers LDL cholesterol and is associated with a low incidence of CHD,” according to the International Consensus Statement. One thriving

example of this is the island of Crete, the center of the Mediterranean diet, where the population has an incidence of coronary disease 37 times lower than Americans.

Major characteristics of the Mediterranean diet (a high antioxidant intake from fruit, vegetables, and olive oil) contribute to the low incidence of cancers in the Mediterranean region. Diets high in meat consumption with few grains and vegetables are associated with a higher risk of colon cancer. But even diets low in fruits and vegetables, which contain antioxidant-rich olive oil, can provide protection against colon cancer.

In another recent study involving over 61,000 women ages 40-76, the women who ingested at least 10 grams of olive oil daily cut their risk of breast cancer in half. The women who consumed 5 grams of other oils daily (corn or safflower oil—common to North American diets) increased their risk of breast cancer by 69 percent.

Aside from the effects of olives on CHD and cancer prevention, olive products provide other health benefits including reduced levels of LDL cholesterol and increased levels of HDL cholesterol, which lowers the risk of additional heart problems. Olives also provide a high percentage of gastric ulcer healing and enhance functions of the gallbladder and pancreas.

Additionally, several investigations are being conducted on the benefits olive oil has on inflammatory autoimmune diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis.

In the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* the Mediterranean diet is described as a “dietary pattern that is attractive for its famous palatability as well as for its health benefits, and one that can be adopted in its entirety or in conjunction with meals inspired by other healthful dietary traditions from cultures throughout the world.” Whether adopting the Mediterranean diet in its entirety or adapting pieces to accompany an established lifestyle, this diet provides multiple sources of diverse antioxidants for a long and healthy life. And history, with the help of science, once again proves that the olive truly is a symbol of endurance, wisdom, and health.

This is the first article in a three-part series.