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Researchers press olive oil for its benefit secrets

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Modern science is finally catching up with the 5,000-year-old tradition of olive oil production through a better understanding of how and why olive oil contributes to the health benefits of the famed Mediterranean diet.

In a conference called Beyond Extra Virgin, dozens of experts and scores of attendees descended on the UC Davis campus this week to discuss the future of extra virgin olive oil, including some of its health benefits.

And olive oil has racked up a truly impressive array of benefits.

"Olive oil has been associated with the reduced risk of a number of diseases including coronary heart disease, hypertension, colon cancer, breast cancer, and rheumatoid arthritis," said Clare Hasler, an expert on Food Science at UC Davis.

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But just what makes olive oil so beneficial? A majority of research on the topic focuses on two main properties of olive oil:

- It contains a majority of monounsaturated fats such as oleic acid. Monounsaturated fats reduce LDL cholesterol – the bad kind – which can contribute to arterial plaque and eventually heart attacks.
- It contains a range of antioxidants including polyphenols, molecules that act as antioxidants, which protect cells from the harmful side effects of normal metabolism.

Dr. Antonia Trichopoulou, a professor at the University of Athens, is investigating some of the more than 200 other micro-components of olive oil to better understand what chemical constituents may have health benefits.

For now though it seems a safe bet that the more polyphenols an olive oil has, the better it is for your overall health. "The best olive oil is the one with the most phenolic content," explained María Isabel Covas, a biochemist from Barcelona, Spain.

Virgin and extra virgin olive oils have higher levels of polyphenols and lower acidity than refined olive oil.

Polyphenol levels depend on several factors, including the variety of olive used, the time of olive harvest, the delay of olive processing, the processing methods used, and the way the oil is stored before consumption.

According to Antonia Tamborrino, a researcher at the University of Bari in Italy, polyphenols' enemy is oxygen. The more oxygen the oil comes in contact with during processing, the lower the polyphenol level.

Corto Olive in Stockton uses nitrogen as a way of inhibiting the oil's contact with oxygen during production. Research has shown that oil stored in nitrogen-conditioned tanks shows less loss of polyphenols.

Removing the olive pit before processing can also improve polyphenol levels since enzymes in the pit can interact with and neutralize polyphenols, according to Tamborrino.

Unfortunately for consumers, polyphenol levels are not routinely disclosed on olive oil labels, making it difficult to select a healthier oil just by looking at packaging.

However, the overall bitterness and pungency of olive oil is closely related to the levels of polyphenols.

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Covas, the biochemist from Barcelona, offered this advice: Try a range of extra virgin olive oils and select the most bitter and green oil that still suits your tastes. While all olive oil is good for you, the more pungent and bitter, the more antioxidant polyphenols you'll have in your diet.

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