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“Mediterranean diet” benefits partly due to oil: study

April 19, 2010
Courtesy of BioMed Central and World Science staff

Ingredients of olive oil that suppress inflammation in the body are partly responsible for the healthy effects of “Mediterranean diets,” scientists say in a new report.

A Mediterranean diet is generally considered to be one with plenty of fruits, vegetables, legumes, cereals, some fish and alcohol, and little dairy and meat. Olives and olive oil are also typical features of Mediterranean diets. Such regimens have been linked to a death rate reduced by half in 70- to 90-year-olds, and benefits such as lower risk of cardiovascular disease and Alzheimer’s disease.

Part of the explanation for such effects lies in a family of weakly acidic, organic chemical compounds called phenols, found in olive oil, according to Francisco Perez-Jimenez from the University of Cordoba, Spain, lead researcher in the new study.

Phenols have effects on genes involved in inflammation, he added, a process in which blood flow to specific parts of the body increases as part of an immune response. Inflammation can become an abnormal, chronic condition in a number of diseases, including heart disease and arthritis.

The phenols in virgin olive oil suppress several genes that promote inflammation, said

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Perez-Jimenez. Virgin olive oil is oil squeezed out of olives at relatively low temperatures in a process known as cold pressing. Virgin and particularly “extra-virgin” olive oil, which comes from the first pressing of the olives, have the highest phenol content, said Perez-Jimenez.

Perez-Jimenez and colleagues studied the effects of eating a breakfast rich in phenol compounds on gene activity in 20 patients with metabolic syndrome, a common condition associated with increased risk of cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes.

The study participants ate controlled breakfasts, and for six weeks before the study they had to avoid all drugs, vitamin tablets and other supplements. “We identified 98 differentially expressed [activated] genes when comparing the intake of phenol-rich olive oil with low-phenol olive oil,” said Perez-Jimenez.

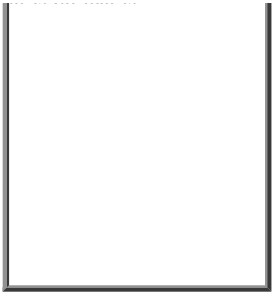
“Several of the repressed genes are known to be involved in pro-inflammatory processes,” he added. That suggests the diet can switch the activity of immune system cells to a less harmful “inflammatory profile,” he added.

“These findings strengthen the relationship between inflammation, obesity and diet and provide evidence at the most basic level of healthy effects derived from virgin olive oil consumption in humans. It will be interesting to evaluate whether particular phenolic compounds carry these effects, or if they are the consequence of a synergic effect” of the entire group of phenol compounds, he said.

The study is published in the research journal *BMC Genomics*.

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