

Study: Some olive oil can ease pain, perhaps fight disease

By Robert Lee Hotz
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Freshly pressed olive oil can ease the pain of living too well — literally — according to researchers.

The throat-stinging squeezings of the pulped olive — the only vegetable oil that can be consumed without processing — contains a compound that has the same pain-relieving effect of the popular over-the-counter drug ibuprofen, scientists at the Monell Chemical Senses Center in Philadelphia reported in research published last week in the journal *Nature*.

The discovery of a natural anti-inflammatory agent in extra-virgin olive oil offers a reliable biochemical insight into the well-documented but puzzling health benefits of a Mediterranean diet, which appears to lower the risk of cancer, heart ailments and some chronic diseases even though it is high in fat and salt.

Only the freshest — and usually most expensive — olive oil, however, contains significant amounts of the pungent compound, called oleocanthal, the researchers said. Aging and cooking destroy it.

The irritating intensity of the taste of a fresh extra virgin olive oil turned out to be directly related to how much oleocanthal the oil contained.

The highest levels are found in the olives grown in Tuscany and the lowest in many California olive groves.

As gourmet estate oils have become a connoisseur's collectible in recent years, however, some Northern California growers have established groves of Italian olive trees that appear to

yield high amounts of oleocanthal in their oil, the researchers said.

According to the research, oleocanthal inhibits the activity of cyclooxygenase enzymes, the same medicinal effect of ibuprofen, which is known as a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory.

Inflammation is believed to underpin a variety of chronic diseases, the researchers said.

"When we checked the pharmacology, it was identical to ibuprofen," said Monell researcher Paul Breslin, an expert in the psycho-physics of food who helped lead a team of scientists that spent two years investigating this chemical property of olive oil.

The Monell center is an independent nonprofit research institute, and the study was conducted without financial support from the food industry, importers or olive growers.

"It seems plausible," Breslin said, "that oleocanthal plays a causal role in the health benefits associated with diets where olive oil is the principal source of fat."

In the hothouse of health food claims, in which coffee is touted as America's No. 1 source of antioxidants and people are urged to crack walnuts just for the omega-3 fatty acids inside, the medical side effects of food can be just a marketing ploy.

"I find the whole notion of the pharmacology of food suspect," Gourmet editor Ruth Reichl cautioned. "If you research stuff long enough, you will find some benefit in anything. There are many, many bad food fads, and we are still in a fairly primitive science stage with this."

Even so, she said, people have been cultivating olives for thou-

sands of years. "I do believe that ancient peoples were smarter about the medical benefits of plants than we are. It makes sense to me that they would find something like this about olive

oil."

Breslin and his colleagues calculated that a daily dose of 50 grams of extra virgin olive oil was equivalent to about 10 percent of the recommended

adult dose of ibuprofen for pain relief.

Author Calvin Trillin, considered one of the first champions of American regional cuisine, said, "There may be a problem if you figure you can cure your headache with a plate of pasta with olive oil. ... It may only be a matter of time before there is extra-virgin Advil and first-pressing Motrin."