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Thursday, 18 December 2008

Extra-virgin olive oil contains plant chemicals that combat breast cancer, a study has found.

Scientists believe the discovery may open the door to new treatments for the disease. It may also help explain why olive-rich Mediterranean diets appear to reduce the risk of breast cancer.

Extra-virgin olive oil is made from pressing olives without the use of heat or chemical treatments. Olive oil made this way contains plant chemicals otherwise lost in the refining process.


Researchers in Spain separated olive oil into “fractions” containing different plant chemicals, which were then tested for their effects on breast cancer cells in the laboratory.


All the fractions containing chemicals chiefly found in extra-virgin olive oil suppressed the breast cancer-promoting gene HER2 in the cells.


The compounds, known as “polyphenols”, caused cells with overactive HER2 to commit suicide through a process called apoptosis.

In normal circumstances, apoptosis naturally helps to clear away defective cells that might turn cancerous. Drug Herceptin targets HER2 gene but is only effective in certain patients.

The scientists, led by Dr Javier Menendez, from the Catalan Institute of Oncology in Girona, and Dr Antonio Segura-Carretero, from the University of Granada were writing in online open access journal BMC Cancer.

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