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Health

Olive oil could fight cancer: study

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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 that are 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 and dangerous cells that might turn cancerous. A well known cancer drug, Herceptin, also targets the 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, warned that the findings should be treated with caution.

They wrote in the online open access journal BMC Cancer: "The active phytochemicals... exhibited tumoricidal effects against cultured breast cancer cells at concentrations that are unlikely to be achieved in real life by consuming olive oil."

However they added that extra-virgin olive oil polyphenols might provide "an excellent and safe platform for the design of new anti-breast cancer drugs".

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