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Chemical in extra-virgin olive oil can fight cancer

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By John von Radowitz
Thursday December 18 2008

Extra-virgin olive oil contains plant chemicals that can 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.

SUICIDE

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 die off 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 University of Granada, warned that the findings should be treated with caution.

And Dr Sarah Cant, of Breakthrough Breast Cancer, said: "There's no evidence to suggest that consuming large amounts of olive oil will reduce a woman's risk of breast cancer."

- *John von Radowitz*

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