

## O is for Olive Oil!

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Heart Disease is the number one killer in the United States. According to the American Heart Association, poor diet and lack of exercise contributes to over 300,000 deaths each year. Whether poor diets can be blamed on fast foods, highly processed foods, or excessive portion sizes, the typical American diet consists of more than one third of its calories as fat. These high fat diets significantly increase the risk of developing high cholesterol, which is a risk factor for developing heart disease. Recent statistics show that half of all Americans have cholesterol levels that are too high (over 200 mg/dL).

Plenty of research suggests that cooking with olive oil can be beneficial to your health. Why so healthful? Compared with vegetable oils, olive oil has far more monounsaturated fat (the good kind). And it has a little saturated fat.

That's the key—monounsaturated fats may lower total and LDL-(bad) cholesterol in blood and perhaps raise HDL-(good) cholesterol, while saturated fats raise both total and LDL-cholesterol. The risk for heart disease goes up when total cholesterol and LDL levels are higher and/or HDLs are lower. Because it comes from plants, olive oil has no cholesterol. Current guidelines encourage a diet that is low in saturated fat and cholesterol and moderate in total fat. Healthy choices for fats are mono- or polyunsaturated fats found in foods like olive oil, peanuts, peanut butter, and fatty fish.

The question then becomes – which type of olive oil to use? Olive oil comes in a number of varieties, including virgin, light and extra virgin. But they are all the same in terms of fat content, either types of fat or total amounts of fat.

The difference among olive oils lies mostly in the flavor. Extra virgin olive oil is low in acid, resulting in a fruity flavor and aroma, so you don't need to use as much to enjoy the flavor.

Virgin olive oil is more acidic, meaning you need to use more to get the distinct olive oil flavor. Light olive oil is self-explanatory – it's lighter in color and flavor.

Whichever type of olive oil you prefer, remember they all have something else in common: They are all high in total fat and calories, so go easy on portions. Because oils are concentrated and solid fats may have some other ingredients besides fat, olive oil at 120 calories per tablespoon and 14 fat grams has slightly more calories than butter/margarine. The main difference is the type of fat. Olive oil is mostly monounsaturated; butter and stick margarine, mostly saturated.