

Mediterranean Diet

Back in the sixties, an American epidemiologist examined the relationship between diet and heart disease rates in seven countries. It was found that people who lived along the Mediterranean Sea suffered less deaths from heart attacks and other coronary related diseases than Americans and people in Western industrialized countries. The population of Crete has the lowest rate of death from heart disease and the longest life expectancy of all the Mediterranean countries.

The distinguishing factor for the above is the dietary fat consumed by people in Mediterranean countries. Fat is mainly of vegetable origin as opposed to highly saturated animal fats. Also, people in Mediterranean countries substitute fish and low fat goats cheese for meat and dairy products.

What is so good about the Mediterranean Diet?

The main characteristics of the M Diet include an absolute abundance of plant food (fruits, vegetables, whole-grain cereals, nuts and legumes); olive oil as principle source of fat, fish and poultry consumed in low-to-moderate amounts; relatively low consumption of red meat and a moderate consumption of wine, normally with meals.

Red wine contains resveratrol, which acts as an antioxidant and may extend life. Resveratrol was found to extend the life of some yeast cells by as much as 70%. Since yeast and humans share many genes, this might have a beneficial effect on our lifespan.

Our health starts in the soil. Minerals in the soil are picked up by plants and passed on to us. Selenium, a potent antioxidant, is a mineral abundant in the Mediterranean soil and diet. Britain has one of the lowest intakes of selenium and the highest incidence of heart disease; this is probably to lower levels in the soil and a diet high in processed food.

Olive oil is mono-unsaturated which means that it isn't so prone to oxidation as the polyunsaturated oils and therefore is the best oil to use for cooking. Also, unlike saturated fat, olive oil does not increase the fat level in the blood and there is evidence that it helps increase HDL cholesterol (the good cholesterol that helps transport cholesterol in foods out of the arteries).

It might also be the Mediterranean lifestyle – the relaxed atmosphere and exposure to strong sunlight that does the trick?

Before you rush off to an Italian for a blow out, remember that eating a cheesy pasta dish, followed by Tiramisu and a whole bottle of red wine is not quite what is meant by a Mediterranean diet!

Unfortunately, dietary patterns in Greece and other Mediterranean countries are changing rapidly. People there are increasing their consumption of saturated fat and refined carbohydrates. This is proven by the increase in prevalence of obesity in Greece.