

The Mediterranean Diet is alive and well

At a time when many health 'facts' are under question, there is increasing evidence that the Mediterranean dietary approach (MedDiet) improves the quality and length of life.

Beneficial impacts have been reported on many health issues, including cardiovascular, stroke, cognitive decline, diabetes and breast cancer prevention. The benefits hold for females and males.

What is a Mediterranean diet?

In the 1960's, adults living in certain regions bordering the Mediterranean sea (Crete, Greece and Southern Italy) were displaying low rates of chronic diseases and relatively high longevity.

Over time, nine critical elements of their normal eating pattern became associated with these beneficial outcomes. While each element is individually important, it is the combination of them that contributes most to the ultimate health benefits.

The nine critical elements are generally agreed to be vegetables, legumes, fruits, nuts, whole grains, seafood, mono-unsaturated oils, red wine and meat.

Vegetables like lettuce, beetroot, carrots and onions are everyday staples

Legumes such as beans, peas and chickpeas are common

Fruits including grapes, tomatoes, melons and cucumbers are really core items consumed with most meals

Nuts are mostly low fat types like almonds and walnuts typically eaten as snacks or added to meals

Whole grains are the base for breads, polenta and pasta

Seafood is eaten two or three times a week, including fish and shellfish

Olive oil is the main unsaturated fat, with some additional fat in moderate use of dairy products (yoghurt, cheese)

A daily glass of **red wine** taken with meals is the typical alcoholic drink

Red meat and poultry are relatively rarely eaten (roughly weekly) with just a few eggs, often included in cooking.

Elements of the MedDiet come under closer scrutiny from time to time:

Cooking with olive oil

Extra Virgin olive oil smokes at a lower temperature than other oils when used for cooking. This gave rise to concerns it was breaking down into toxic compounds. Whether this claim was fact or simply market-speak promoting other oils, it has now been refuted.

Further, because Extra Virgin olive oil is extracted at low temperatures, if stored carefully it retains its antioxidant and taste advantages over other oils including refined olive oils.

Gut Health

The MedDiet is increasingly recognised for its contribution to gut health.

The gut houses over a kilo of microbes – our microbiome - which strongly influences aspects of our well-being while also extracting energy from our food and stimulating the production of many hormones.

The MedDiet, rich in unsaturated fats and fibre, is emerging as a dietary strategy which can assist the functioning of our microbiome.

There is growing awareness of the importance of **prebiotics**, a special type of plant fibre which promotes the growth of 'good' bacteria in our gut. These good bacteria are called **probiotics**.

Many forms of packaged probiotics make claims but the science behind them is not always sound. The good news is that the MedDiet itself provides a healthy dose, which may be one reason for its surprising range of benefits.

SUMMARY:

In an era of evidence-based medical progress, the MedDiet seems to be on track to becoming a yardstick for preventive medicine. While the impact of its individual elements can vary with season or source, it has been suggested that the combination of its many elements with antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties smooths out the influence of any single component. The whole may just be more important than the sum of its parts.