The Mediterranean Diet

The well known “Mediterranean Diet” is not simply a weight loss program. This way of eating has been shown to significantly influence our longevity, the occurrence of major life threatening factors, general quality of life and the risk of Alzheimer Disease.

What is a Mediterranean diet?

In the 1960’s, it was found that adults living in certain regions bordering the Mediterranean sea (Crete, Greece and Southern Italy) displayed 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.

While a detailed menu is beyond this newsletter, a few comments on each of these are worth making:

**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 and 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.

The wider benefits

A host of research papers shows the wide-ranging impact of this food intake. The overall outcome is an increase in longevity and a correspondingly lowered incidence of life threatening factors.

Reduced vulnerability to cardiovascular problems such as heart attacks and strokes heads the initial lists of benefits. There appear to be many factors involved including lower blood pressure, less peripheral heart disease and a tendency to lower cholesterol levels.

Higher fruit and vegetable consumption is strongly associated with lower cancer risk. The types of cancers include lung cancer and particularly those associated with the digestive system. A lower risk of breast cancer is suggested.

A lower risk of Type 2 diabetes is also linked to this diet.

Both smokers and non-smokers were shown to benefit.

The results hold true for both men and women.

Influence on Alzheimer Disease

A very recent study on an urban population examined the effects of a Mediterranean-type diet and physical activity on the onset of Alzheimer Disease. It was conducted over 14 years.

The study showed that Mediterranean diet adherence and higher physical activity were independently associated with reduced risk of Alzheimer Disease.

A sad twist to a happy ending

With the advent of the typical western diet, the relative longevity and health advantages in the original regions of study have tended to dissipate. Increases in dietary intake of saturated fats, cholesterol and sodium are among the suggested reasons.

Fortunately, timely scientific research identified the benefits and the primary factors involved in the original Mediterranean diet. Further research has now underlined its many influences and some underlying reasons.

We can therefore take advantage of this in the better management of our own diet, with the real prospect of more positive outcomes.