

Mediterranean Diet

Pivotal research in the New England Journal of Medicine today confirmed well-worn notions that the Mediterranean diet -- including produce, olive oil, nuts, etc. -- significantly reduced rates of heart attacks and strokes, as compared to a low-fat diet. Now, to make these foods as accessible as corn sugar



RobertPratta/Reuters

When research has to be stopped because it would be "unethical to continue," it suggests one of a few polarizing scenarios. In this case, it's because the study found something that was clearly good. So good that after five years of watching trends in heart disease and strokes among people at high risk, the researchers could not in good conscience continue to recommend a "low-fat diet" to anyone.

On the island of Ikaria, in Greece, there are more centenarians than you can shake a stick at. In Loma Linda, California, the Adventist community has a lifespan that's five to seven years longer than the average American's. These are people who eat a Mediterranean diet, and we've long inferred correlations between that and their prosperity and longevity. But we haven't had solid research to show us how important their diet -- as opposed to other factors genetic, lifestyle, and social -- actually is.

That's why today's study in the New England Journal of Medicine is particularly important.

As Dr. Steven E. Nissen, chairman of the department of cardiovascular medicine at the Cleveland Clinic Foundation, told Gina Kolata at The New York Times, the study "says you can eat a nicely balanced diet with fruits and vegetables and olive oil and lower heart disease by 30 percent ... And you can actually enjoy life." So, enjoy life, if that's what it means to you.

Of course, utilizing this knowledge doesn't just mean educating people about diet choices, but also making these foods accessible. That would necessarily involve reassessing and prioritizing how the U.S. subsidizes agriculture. You don't need to eat a ton of any one these items to see the benefits of the diet, so making them more common in U.S. culture is not at all inconceivable.

Here's how the study defined and broke down the diets it tested:

Recommended in Mediterranean diet

Olive oil*	≥4 tbsp/day
Tree nuts and peanuts†	≥3 servings/wk
Fresh fruits	≥3 servings/day
Vegetables	≥2 servings/day
Fish (especially fatty fish), seafood	≥3 servings/wk
Legumes	≥3 servings/wk
Sofrito‡	≥2 servings/wk
White meat	Instead of red meat
Wine with meals (optionally, only for habitual drinkers)	≥7 glasses/wk

New England Journal of Medicine

Discouraged in Mediterranean diet

Soda drinks	<1 drink/day
Commercial bakery goods, sweets, and pastries§	<3 servings/wk
Spread fats	<1 serving/day
Red and processed meats	<1 serving/day

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Recommended in low-fat diet

Low-fat dairy products	≥3 servings/day
Bread, potatoes, pasta, rice	≥3 servings/day
Fresh fruits	≥3 servings/day
Vegetables	≥2 servings/wk
Lean fish and seafood	≥3 servings/wk

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Discouraged in low-fat diet

Vegetable oils (including olive oil)	≤2 tbsp/day
Commercial bakery goods, sweets, and pastries§	≤1 serving/wk
Nuts and fried snacks	≤1 serving /wk
Red and processed fatty meats	≤1 serving/wk
Visible fat in meats and soups¶	Always remove
Fatty fish, seafood canned in oil	≤1 serving/wk
Spread fats	≤1 serving/wk
Sofrito‡	≤2 servings/wk

New England Journal of Medicine

Sofrito is "a sauce made with tomato and onion, often including garlic and aromatic herbs, and slowly simmered with olive oil."