



Eating like a Mediterranean

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Eating like a Mediterranean might just keep your brain healthy well into your old age,

to say nothing of the benefits to your heart and more.

A number of studies published in the past ten years have pointed to the benefits of eating a so-called Mediterranean diet because it may protect against mental decline with aging. Among others, the Mayo Clinic said that there is moderately compelling evidence that adherence to the Mediterranean-type diet is linked to less late-life cognitive impairment. Should you join the (Mediterranean) party?

Actually, there is no such thing as THE Mediterranean Diet. Rather, there are many versions of it as it varies according to region, culture and the local availability of fresh foods. The similarities, however, are extensive: reliance on plant foods such as vegetables, fruits, beans, whole grains, nuts, olives and olive oil along with some cheese, yogurt, fish, poultry, eggs and wine. These foods, we know, provide generous amounts of micro-nutrients, antioxidants, vitamins, minerals, and fibre. These are the pieces that work so well together to protect against chronic disease. Most foods are fresh, seasonal whole foods, that is, unprocessed and include only small amounts of saturated fat, sodium, sweets and meat.

Compared to a typical North American diet, this way of eating includes more fruits, vegetables, legumes, cereals, fish and monounsaturated fats (yes, like olive oil). There is less red meat and dairy products, and fewer saturated fats. There is also moderate alcohol consumption, especially of red wine with meals.

All this sounds very appetizing, of course, but what are the benefits? “What’s in it for me?” if you will.

Over the past decade, the health effects of a “Mediterranean diet” have been studied extensively. Findings show that following a Mediterranean diet protects against the development of heart disease, metabolic syndrome, some types of cancer, obesity, type 2 diabetes, dementia, Alzheimer’s disease... and also leads to a longer lifespan.

An updated analysis of a 2006 study of older New Yorkers found that those who most closely followed a Mediterranean-style diet had a 40 per cent lower risk of Alzheimer’s over 5.4 years than those with lowest adherence. Similarly, a follow-up study comparing the eating habits and mental abilities of nearly 3800 older Chicagoans showed that those most closely following the diet experienced a slower rate of cognitive decline with aging; people who ate most like Mediterraneans had brains that functioned as if they were several years younger.

For thousands of years, residents along the Mediterranean coast have enjoyed their delicious diet, leisurely dining and engaged in regular physical activity. They may not consider their eating habits as a diet plan — it’s simply a way of life that can lead to long, healthy lives with less chance of chronic disease.

We can conclude that the more we can incorporate vegetables, olive oil and fish into our diets and moderate wine consumption, the better for our aging brains and bodies.

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