

Comprehensive Benefits of Applying a Sustainable Mediterranean Diet

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Abstract

The Mediterranean diet is considered as a paradigm among the world's diets. It embraces healthy food and alternative agriculture, but is also a linkage between health and welfare of consumers, environmental practices and cultural customs. This sustainable food model is the one that combines in a hypothetical equation multidirectional interaction of interdependent variables (e.g. ecological, economical, cultural, social and nutritional), placing food at the heart of the concept of sustainable development.

Keywords: *Mediterranean Diet; Food; Lifestyle; Sustainability*

The Mediterranean diet is part of a dietary standard, which the World Health Organization recognizes as high quality, but it is fundamentally a lifestyle based on the ancestral culture of the Mediterranean people, and recognized by UNESCO as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity since December 2013, as a result of an application submitted by Cyprus, Croatia, Spain, Greece, Italy, Morocco and Portugal. This recognition represents an undertaking to work to safeguard this legacy.

The Mediterranean diet, by its associated values, supports a healthy diet and lifestyle with significant results in promoting health, against disease such as obesity, type 2 diabetes, certain types of cancer and neurodegenerative diseases and lower incidence of cardiovascular diseases, scientifically confirmed by several studies [1-3]. Indeed, the dietary patterns that prevail in this diet have many common characteristics. Olive oil occupies the central position of the culinary, in particular the use of extra virgin oil. Olive oil is a fat obtained from the fruit of the *Olea europaea* (olive tree), a traditional tree crop of the Mediterranean region. Whole olives are pressed to produce this distinctive oil but they are also consumed both as a snack and an ingredient in salads, sandwiches and stews. Olives are low in cholesterol and a good source of dietary fiber, which the body needs for good gut health. They are also rich in iron and copper and they have a chewy texture and a rich salty taste which makes them very pleasurable. Olive oil is important because of its high content of oleic acid and antioxidants that makes it suitable as nutrients and healthy products but it is also associated with the consumption of large quantities of vegetables in the form of salads and in preparing cooked foods. Other essential components of the Mediterranean diet are cereals, preferably as whole grain, grain legumes like beans or chickpeas, which guarantee the ingestion of vegetable proteins with high nutritional value and also nuts, considered a high-calorie food, they are powerhouses antioxidant, all of them should be consumed in high amount and frequency. This pattern also includes moderate consumption of milk and dairy products, mainly yogurt and cheese, white meat and eggs. Also, fish should be consumed, especially the bluefish that guarantees an adequate intake of polyunsaturated fat acids and shellfish [4]. On the contrary, consumption of red meat, processed meats, and foods rich in sugars and saturated fats should be small in both quantity

and frequency. Other recommendations are plenty daily intake of water which should be guaranteed, as well as, moderate consumption of wine especially during family meals [4]. The high consumption of vegetables, such as tomatoes, kale, broccoli, spinach, carrots, cucumbers, and onions and fresh or dried fruits, like apples, figs, grapes, and melons, and many condiments and spices, guarantee a high intake of various vitamins, carotenoids, tocopherols, mineral and several healthy substances, such as polyphenols and anthocyanins. The vegetable products are very important also for their intake of dietary fibre, which improves intestinal peristalsis and reduces the glycaemic index of the meal [5]. In general terms, this diet promotes a high consumption of dietary fibre, a low glycaemic index and glycaemic load, anti-inflammatory effects and antioxidant compounds that may act together to produce favourable effects on health status [6].

It should be noted that, as exposed, beyond the diversity of different categories of foods recommended, the Mediterranean diet presented also a diversity of preparation techniques, such as boiling, roasting, sun-drying, salting, or fermentation, developing each of it, a multiplicity of food flavours and textures that balances meals and finds ways to pursuit of fully understanding consumer desires. However, in the proposal of the Mediterranean diet, eating is not only a way of reach satiety, satiation and nutritive needs, but it is also a social behaviour that should be accompanied with family and friends celebrating, in some of the cases, religious festivals that mark annual cycles [7]. Eating together is the basis of cultural identity and the survival of communities throughout the Mediterranean basin. It is a moment of social interaction and communication, affirmation and renewal of the identity of a family, group or community.

Nevertheless, the Mediterranean diet further than to fulfil diverse consumer nutritional needs, emphasizes many other goals. In spite of the great progress in agricultural practices and technological process, with direct impact in consumer's foods quality which follows their lifestyles changes, different research studies emphasize the large benefits to ensure the small-scale producer, supporting thus, local agro-biodiversity and economy, due to the linkage between food quality and agricultural biodiversity [8]. Mediterranean diet, itself encourages the consumption of fresh and seasonal local products, most of them produced on family farms and sold in short circuits, appealing to the flavours and tastes of local gastronomy, contributes to the enhancement of local and proximity products, to safeguarding regional varieties and boosting local and regional economies [9].

In addition, the Mediterranean diet supports the development of a relatively new concept the bio-cultural diversity defined as "conservation actions made in the service of sustaining the biophysical and socio-cultural components of dynamic, interacting, and interdependent social-ecological systems" [10]. This concept explores the relations between nutrition, diversity of food cultures (varieties and species) and food products, biodiversity, and diverse landscapes, without forgetting cultural multiplicity. Furthermore, the different benefits from the enhanced use of bio-cultural diversity and nutrition, offering changes in individual behaviour and motivating fundamental alterations in production and consumption patterns, should be observed and documented to guide policies and other actors for applied action in the food system.

A definition of sustainable diets system should address sustainability of the whole food chain, (i.e. 'getting biodiversity from the farm to the plate') while acknowledging the interdependencies of food production systems and food and nutrient requirements. Therefore, taking everything in consideration, Mediterranean diet is a sustainable food model. The Mediterranean diet involves a range of skills, knowledge, rituals, symbols and traditions linked to food nutritional quality of diet and biodiversity, variety of food practices and food preparation techniques, strong commitment to environment and local cultural heritages, respect for human nature and seasonality, diversity of landscapes that contribute to the wellbeing, that promotes the social interaction and economic aspects.

Conclusion

There are many strategies to promote human health and longevity that should be evaluated to understated their real effect on communities. However, there are already evidences, on the health level, related to the benefits of the application of the concept of the Mediterranean Diet in our life. Certainly, it would bring many other positive ones, economic, social and environmental. The Mediterranean Diet is an easy concept with logic application that encourages the improvement of human life in a globalist and sustained way.

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Disclosure Statement

Elsa M Gonçalves and Marta Abreu are the sole authors of this short communication and declares no conflict of interest.

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