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Mediterranean Menu

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HEALTHY CHOICES

The diet decreases chronic diseases and improves your health status.



It's more than just olive oil and garlic.

Mediterranean Menu

BY WINSTON J. CRAIG

Today, we see a renewed interest in the traditional dietary patterns of people of the Mediterranean region. In addition, many health organizations encourage people to adopt the healthy eating habits followed by the Mediterranean coastal regions of Southern Europe, such as Southern Italy and Greece.

The Mediterranean diet emphasizes an abundance of plant-based foods. There is pasta in endless variety served with tomato sauce, beans and macaroni, lots of bread (largely whole grain) typically eaten with olive oil rather than butter or margarine, lots of fresh vegetables (especially greens), and fresh fruit for dessert, rather than pie and cake. The food is seasoned with garlic, onions, basil, oregano and other health-promoting herbs. Olive oil, rich in its monounsaturated fat, is the major source of fat. Cheese and yogurt are used only moderately. A major factor that distinguishes the diet from the rest of Western Europe and the U.S. is the low consumption of meat and meat products, and the regular use of tree nuts and olives. Because of this, the diet is low in saturated fat, and rich in fiber and phytochemicals that act as powerful antioxidant properties. Consumers of a traditional Mediterranean diet also get plenty of exercise and recognize the value of enjoying meals with family and friends.

A systematic review of about 40 studies found that a Mediterranean diet was associated with a favorable health status, a higher quality of life, a decreased incidence of degenerative diseases and a lower risk of overall mortality. Following this diet typically results in lowered blood lipids, less hypertension and cardiovascular disease, less cancers (including the breast and bowel), lower rates of obesity, diabetes, metabolic syndrome and arthritis, less age-related cognitive impair-



ment and a greater longevity. Strict adherence to a Mediterranean diet was associated with a 13 percent lower incidence of neurodegenerative diseases, such as Parkinson's disease and Alzheimer's disease.

For both men and women, a Mediterranean diet has been shown to be more effective than a low-fat diet to achieve weight loss. A study in Spain found that high adherence to a Mediterranean diet was associated with an 83 percent decreased risk of developing diabetes, and an improvement in fasting blood glucose levels and better glycemic control.

The Mediterranean diet is known for its abundant use of olives and olive oil. The extra virgin olive oil contains significant levels of tyrosol, hydroxytyrosol, oleuropein and other beneficial phenolic compounds that decrease the risk of blood clots and blood lipids, and possess strong anti-inflammatory properties. Olive oil may also facilitate lower blood pressure levels.

In Barcelona, a Mediterranean diet supplemented with either virgin olive oil or tree nuts reduced blood pressure, improved blood lipids and diminished insulin resistance compared to a low fat diet in subjects at high risk for cardiovascular disease. The benefits of using nuts daily to achieve lower blood lipids is greatest among those with elevated LDL cholesterol levels, and a lower body weight.

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