

Mediterranean Diet Study Shows Heart Health Benefits

People who eat a plant-based Mediterranean diet supplemented with nuts or virgin olive oil can enjoy long-term benefits that may include a 30 percent reduction in the risk of cardiovascular disease, according to a landmark global study released at the sixth International Congress on Vegetarian Nutrition hosted by Loma Linda University Health in California.

The study, published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, involved 7,447 individuals (55-80 years old) at high risk of cardiovascular disease, but with no symptoms. The results favor two Mediterranean diets (one supplemented with nuts, the other with virgin olive oil) over a low-fat diet for beneficial effects on intermediate outcomes that include body weight, blood pressure, insulin resistance, blood lipids, lipid oxidation and systemic inflammation. The study, called “PREDIMED” for “PREvención con Dieta MEDiterránea” (Prevention with Mediterranean Diet), began in 2003 and was completed in 2011. Participants were followed for an average of 4.8 years.

“The aim of PREDIMED was to determine whether a plant-based Mediterranean diet, supplemented with either tree nuts, such as walnuts, almonds and hazelnuts, or virgin olive oil, when compared to a low-fat diet, can help prevent cardiovascular diseases, such as cardiovascular death, heart attack and stroke,” said Dr. Miguel Angel Martinez of the University of Navarra, Spain, a physician, epidemiologist, nutrition researcher and a lead investigator of the study. “What we found was that a Mediterranean diet offers a preventive efficacy that was also assessed on secondary variables, including death from all causes, and incidence of diabetes and metabolic syndrome.”

The Mediterranean diet is a pattern of eating similar to the traditional dietary habits of people living in the countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea. This includes fresh fruits and vegetables, seafood, whole grains and nutritious fats, including walnuts and olive oil.

PREDIMED is a parallel group, multi-center, single-blind, randomized clinical trial conducted by 16 research groups in seven communities in Spain. Participants were given dietetic support and quarterly education sessions to ensure compliance. Energy intake was not specifically restricted in any intervention group. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three groups:

- Low-fat diet (control group)
- Mediterranean diet supplemented with virgin olive oil (50 ml per day)
- Mediterranean diet supplemented with 30 g mixed nuts per day (15 g walnuts, 7.5 g almonds and 7.5 g hazelnuts).

“This study is a prime example of the type of international research being shared at this conference of 800 academics, researchers, dietitians and others dedicated to advancing research about the benefits of plant-based diets,” said Dr. Joan Sabaté, chair of the International Congress on Vegetarian Nutrition and chair of the Department of Nutrition at Loma Linda University’s School of Public Health.

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