

You are never too old for the Mediterranean diet

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The Mediterranean diet contributes to long life for elderly people. This is the conclusion of a study by the Department of Epidemiology and Prevention of the I.R.C.C.S. Neuromed, in Molise, Italy, published in the *British Journal of Nutrition*. Researchers analyzed the relationship between the traditional Mediterranean diet and mortality in a sample of

more than 5,000 people over 65 years of age participating in the Moli-sani Study and followed up for eight years.

In addition to data from the Moli-sani Study participants, Italian researchers also analyzed other epidemiological studies published in several countries, for a total of 12,000 subjects. Results clearly indicate that the Mediterranean [diet](#) significantly reduces the risk of mortality in elderly people. This effect is maintained despite the fact that the Mediterranean diet has changed considerably over the years, with pantries full of supermarket products enjoyed by people with a lifestyle very different from the one followed by original Mediterranean farmers.

"The novelty of our research is to have focused our attention on a population over 65 years old," says Marialaura Bonaccio, epidemiologist at the Department and first author of the study. "We already knew that the Mediterranean diet is able to reduce the risk of mortality in the general population, but we did not know whether it would be the same specifically for [elderly people](#). Now, data from the Moli-sani study clearly show that a traditional Mediterranean-like diet, (rich in fruit, vegetables, fish, pulses, olive oil and cereals, low in meat and dairy products, with moderate wine consumption during meals), is associated with 25 percent reduction of all-cause mortality. This effect remains also if we consider specifically cardiovascular or cerebrovascular mortality."

Licia Iacoviello, head of the Laboratory of Molecular and Nutritional Epidemiology at Neuromed Institute and professor at the University of Insubria, Varese, says, "Besides data from the Moli-sani population, we analysed the results from six other studies conducted on people aged over 65 in other countries, involving a total of 12,000 people. Through meta-analysis, we could confirm that a higher adherence to the Mediterranean diet lowers overall mortality risk in a dose-response, progressive, way. In other words, the more you follow the Mediterranean diet, the greater the gain in terms of [mortality](#) risk reduction."

The foods that offer greater protection within the Mediterranean diet model include a high levels of monounsaturated fats (widely present in extra virgin olive oil) and fish, but also moderate consumption of alcohol, preferably during meals.

"Our research considers nutrition as a whole, but it is still interesting to understand which foods mainly contribute to the 'driving' effect of the Mediterranean diet," explains Bonaccio. "Our data confirm what has already been observed in numerous epidemiological and metabolic studies, namely that a moderate consumption of alcoholic beverages, if inserted in a Mediterranean food context, is a protective factor for our health."

"We think that our data launch an important message in terms of public health," says Giovanni de Gaetano, director of the department. "With the progressive aging of the world population, we know that, in a few years, people over 65 will represent about a quarter of Europeans. It is therefore necessary to study and identify those modifiable factors that can guarantee not only a long lifespan, but also an acceptable quality of life. We use to say that we must add life to years, not just years to life. Our study is a robust basis to encourage a healthy diet model inspired by the principles of the Mediterranean diet, even among older people."

More information: Marialaura Bonaccio et al. Nut consumption is inversely associated with both cancer and total mortality in a Mediterranean population: prospective results from the Moli-sani study, *British Journal of Nutrition* (2015). [DOI: 10.1017/S0007114515002378](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007114515002378)

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