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Scientific Study Offers Further Support for Mediterranean Diet's Effectiveness in Preventing Cardiovascular Disease

Study results analyzed in latest issue of Advances in Nutrition, the international review journal of the American Society for Nutrition

May 14, 2014—The Mediterranean diet is characterized by abundant use of olive oil as the primary cooking fat alongside high consumption of fresh fruits, vegetables, legumes, cereals, nuts, and seeds as well as moderate consumption of fish, seafood, yogurt, cheese, poultry, and eggs. The diet is also characterized by moderate consumption of wine (especially red wine) with meals and limited amounts of red and processed meats and sweets.

Nutrition scientists have long believed that the Mediterranean diet is effective in preventing cardiovascular disease, based on the results of several large-scale epidemiological studies. These studies, however, have been mostly observational, lacking the rigorous controls of randomized clinical trials.

The PREDIMED study, on the other hand, was designed as a randomized clinical trial in order to more accurately assess the long-term effects of the Mediterranean diet on cardiovascular disease. It was conducted in Spain from 2003 to 2011. More than 7,000 individuals participated in the study. The average age of the participants was 67. All participants were deemed at high risk for cardiovascular disease. For example, close to one-half had diabetes and four out of five had hypertension.

Study participants were divided into three groups. The first group was placed on a Mediterranean diet supplemented with extra-virgin olive oil. The second group was placed on a Mediterranean diet supplemented with nuts. The third group, the control group, was asked to follow a general low-fat diet.

A review in the May 2014 issue of *Advances in Nutrition*, “Mediterranean Diet and Cardiovascular Health: Teachings of the PREDIMED Study,” analyzes the PREDIMED findings, confirming that adherents to the Mediterranean diet (whether supplemented with extra-virgin olive or nuts) reduced their long-term risk of cardiovascular disease by 30%, compared to adherents of the general low-fat diet. Moreover, the study found an association between the Mediterranean diet and a reduced risk of diabetes.

The authors of the review noted that “the results clearly show that a high-unsaturated fat dietary pattern is better for cardiovascular health than a lower-fat diet.” Given the average age of

PREDIMED participants, the results also tell us that it is never too late to change dietary habits to improve cardiovascular health.

Importantly, the 30% cardiovascular risk reduction shown with the Mediterranean diet in the PREDIMED study is similar to results reported in trials of statin drugs. The Mediterranean diet, however, does not place additional costs on the health care system.

Just Published Scientific Review Underscores the Value of the Family Meal
Family meals are linked to decreased risk of childhood obesity, eating disorders, and high-risk behaviors

People often lament the decline of the family meal; however, a recently published review in *Advances in Nutrition*, “Come and Get It! A Discussion of Family Mealtime Literature and Factors Affecting Obesity Risk,” notes that there is little evidence to support any dramatic decline in family meal frequency- and that’s a good thing. According to the review authors, the family meal is important, associated with better nutrition and a marked decreased risk of childhood obesity and eating disorders. Moreover, the authors found that family meals are linked to improved perceptions of family relationships and fewer high-risk behaviors.

Several studies have shown that children who have a family dinner most days of the week have significantly higher intakes of protein, fiber, calcium, iron, folate, and vitamins A, B-6, B-12, C and E, when compared to children eating dinner with their families less often. The role of family meals in improving adolescents’ intake of calcium and iron is particularly noteworthy, given that adolescents typically have a lower than recommended intake of these essential minerals. In addition, some studies have shown that children who have frequent family meals make more healthful choices when eating outside the home, choosing foods with less added sugar, saturated fats, and trans fats as a percentage of total calories.

While study results have been somewhat inconsistent, the authors point to a number of research findings that indicate that family meals have a protective effect against childhood obesity. The effect of family meals on parents’ weight is less clear, with a number of studies showing no effect.

Sharing family meals may also improve children’s cognitive development and academic achievement, according to some studies. In addition, family mealtimes may help teens resist engaging in risky behaviors. One long-term study, for example, found that less frequent family meals were significantly associated with substance abuse among teenage girls.

Not all family meals confer the same benefits. The benefits of having a family meal can be undermined if the family consumes fast food, watches television during the meal, or engages in arguments at the table.

Although these findings are intriguing, the authors note that “inconsistent research methodology and instrumentation and limited use of validation studies make comparisons between studies difficult.” They recommend that future research use consistent methodology, examine

associations across a wide range of ages, clarify the effects of the mealtime environment and feeding styles, and develop strategies to help families promote healthful mealtime habits.