

The diet that feeds your brain

September 22 2016



Credit: Rush University Medical Center

The Mediterranean diet—rich in vegetables, fish and olive oil and featuring moderate alcohol consumption—has been shown to reduce the risk of heart disease, certain cancers and diabetes.

A study by researchers at Rush revealed that this diet is also associated with slower rates of [cognitive decline](#) in [older adults](#). The study, which was published in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, looked at how well almost 4,000 older adults on the South Side of Chicago adhered to the Mediterranean diet.

The result: Those who most closely followed the diet in their eating habits showed slower rates of cognitive decline than those whose food choices were less in line with the diet.

Measuring the benefits

Every three years, [study participants](#) underwent a cognitive assessment that tested such things as memory and basic math skills. They also filled out a questionnaire on the frequency with which they ate 139 food items, such as cereal, olive oil, red meat and alcohol.

Out of a maximum score of 55, which would indicate complete adherence to the Mediterranean diet, study participants' average score was 28.

According to lead study author Christy Tangney, PhD, a faculty member in the Department of Clinical Nutrition at Rush, those with the higher scores were also the individuals whose cognitive tests showed a slower rate of decline—even when other factors that might account for the result, such as education level, were considered.

"It's always beneficial to eat healthily," says Tangney. "But we're finding more and more evidence that people who follow the Mediterranean diet have the right idea because they're actually helping to prevent some of the serious health problems that are prevalent among older adults."

A healthy approach to eating

A lot of the rules of thumb for the Mediterranean diet are true of any sensible eating plan, such as replacing whole or 2 percent milk with skim, loading up on lots of fresh fruits and vegetables, and avoiding breads, snacks and cereals made with refined white flour.

Here's a quick rundown of the diet:

- Eat seven to 10 servings a day of fresh fruits and vegetables, including legumes
- Switch to whole grain breads and cereals, and eat more whole-grain rice and pastas
- Keep almonds, cashews, pistachios and walnuts on hand for a quick snack (but because they are high in calories, limit yourself to about a handful a day and avoid candied, honey-roasted or salted nuts)
- Replace butter and margarine with healthy fats such as [olive oil](#) or canola oil
- Use herbs and spices instead of salt to flavor foods
- Limit [red meat](#) to no more than a few times a month
- Eat fish and poultry at least twice a week
- Limit higher fat dairy products, such as whole or 2 percent milk, cheese and ice cream, and switch to skim milk, fat-free yogurt and low-fat cheese
- Enjoy moderate amounts of red wine, such as a glass with lunch or dinner

The diet isn't just about what you should eat—it's also about what you shouldn't eat. As much as possible, avoid processed foods and choose foods with no trans-fats (trans-fats are responsible for increasing bad cholesterol, or LDL, and reducing good cholesterol, or HDL).

Provided by Rush University Medical Center

Citation: The diet that feeds your brain (2016, September 22) retrieved 24 February 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-09-diet-brain.html>

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