

Olive Oil, Greek food halve heart deaths

Australians who regularly eat a Mediterranean-style diet rich in olive oil, vegetables and light cheese are halving their risk of dying from heart disease, research shows.

The benefits of the diet are well documented in Greece and Italy but a newly released Melbourne study has confirmed the same benefits can be reaped in Australia.

The 10-year study tracked the dietary and health patterns of about 40,000 Melburnians and showed a Mediterranean diet had the strongest links to good health.

Monash University researchers found that people who frequently ate traditional Mediterranean foods had a 30 per cent lower risk of dying from cardiovascular problems, like heart attack and stroke, compared to those who ate the least amount of these products. And for coronary heart disease in particular, the risk of death was 50 per cent less, according to the study published in the latest American Journal of Clinical Nutrition.

PhD student Linton Harriss said this was the biggest longitudinal Australian study to show the "amazing" effect of Mediterranean food. "From our analysis there was a very clear advantage to Australians who regularly ate this type of diet," Mr Harriss said. "And it not only affects your health - the cornerstone of a good life - but it means fewer visits to the doctor and less strain on the health system."

The Mediterranean diet is characterised by higher intakes of plant foods and fish, moderate intake of wine and lower intake of animal products. Most frequently consumed items in this winning diet included garlic, cucumber, olive oil, salad greens, capsicum, legumes, tomato, feta and ricotta cheeses, olives, onion, watermelon, steamed fish and boiled chicken.

"The Mediterranean diet is a rich source of antioxidants, mono-unsaturated fats, omega-3 fatty acids and fibre, and relatively low in saturated fats," Mr Harriss said. Antioxidants help reduce oxidative damage to the bodies caused by free radicals, mono-unsaturated fats help to lower cholesterol and omega-3s are believed to help protect the heart.

Fibre can assist in lowering cholesterol, blood pressure and other cardiovascular risk factors. The study, part of the large-scale Health 2020 project, targeted 40,000 men and women aged 40 to 69 years, including about 10,000 who had migrated from Italy and Greece.

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