

Eat Like the Greeks

The most healthful diet in the world is the opposite of what most Americans eat

Question: All the talk about diet plans these days is a bit confusing. What do you believe is the best diet?

J.C., Northampton, Massachusetts

Answer: I am a strong advocate of what's commonly called the "Mediterranean diet." Numerous studies have concluded that it is the most healthful diet in the world.

As its name suggests, the Mediterranean diet is defined by the eating customs of people living around the Mediterranean Sea. In general, their diet is rich in olive oil, whole grains, fresh fish, and fresh fruits and vegetables, and low in red meat, creams and cheeses. The long-term effects of this diet on the body have been well-documented for some 40 years.

A physician named Ancel Keys conducted the initial research on the diet. He and his staff studied more than 12,000 men, ages 40-50, from 1958 to 1964. The men were divided into 16 study groups in seven countries: the United States, Finland, Japan, Italy, Greece, the Netherlands and Yugoslavia.

When Keys analyzed the data at the end of the study, he discovered that men in the Mediterranean groups—Greeks in particular—had the lowest number of deaths from all causes among all the participants.

The Greeks also had the lowest rate of heart disease. Most surprising to the researchers was the dramatic reduction among the Mediterranean men in the proportion of deaths from

coronary heart disease.

The Finns had the highest rate of heart disease. They also consumed almost 40 percent of their calories from fat. More than 50 percent of these calories came from saturated fat.

The Greeks consumed almost the same percentage of calories from fat—but only a small percentage from saturated fat. Most of their fat intake came from olive oil.

The Japanese consumed a mere 9 percent of their total calories from fat, with only 3 percent from saturated fat. Yet, amazingly, the Greeks had fewer incidents of heart disease than the Japanese did. In addition, the rate of heart disease among the Greeks was a whopping near-90 percent lower than it was among Americans.

The big question for Keys and his staff was: How can people eat a higher percentage of calories from fat, smoke more cigarettes, drink more wine, exercise much less frequently, and yet have a longer life-expectancy, fewer cases of coronary heart disease and cancers (other than lung cancer or cigarette-related cancers) than Americans?

Their answer was the Mediterranean diet.

Question: The Bible says a merry heart is good medicine. Can you explain this benefit medically?

C.E., St. Louis, Missouri

Answer: Laughter is indeed good “medicine,” as Proverbs 17:22

says. Dr. Lee Berk of Loma Linda University Medical Center in California concluded that laughter boosts the immune system and reduces dangerous stress hormones.

Cortisol, a stress hormone, fell 39 percent and adrenaline 70 percent among 16 men in one study who had a good belly laugh while watching a funny video. Cortisol is a dangerous hormone that, once elevated for an extended time, becomes like acid in the body. It especially affects the brain, eventually causing memory loss.

Berk reported that laughter helps the immune system by increasing:

1. Immunoglobulin A, which helps protect against respiratory tract infections
2. Gamma interferon, the immune system's front-line defense against viruses
3. B cells that produce antibodies to fight harmful bacteria
4. Complement 2, a combination of proteins that is a catalyst in antibody reactions.

Laughter can lower blood pressure as well. A research team at the University of Maryland reported in 2000 that people who use humor in conversation often are less likely to suffer a heart attack.

Other research has found that people with a good sense of humor have "less stress and better health."

Like a massage, a good belly laugh will stimulate all the major organs. I recommend 10 a day!