

## The Mediterranean Diet, recognized by UNESCO as a cultural heritage of humanity

Rosella Saulle, Giuseppe La Torre

*Dipartimento di Sanità Pubblica e Malattie Infettive, Sapienza Università di Roma. Italy*

*Correspondence to: Rosella Saulle, Dipartimento di Sanità Pubblica e Malattie infettive, Piazzale Aldo Moro 5, 00185 Roma, Italy.*

*E-mail: rosellasaulle@libero.it*

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The term “Mediterranean Diet” was coined, *paradoxically*, by Americans in the early '60s and today – only 50 years from the “discovery” of this characteristic, traditional food model – the UNESCO declares that this century-long cookery culture, belonging to populations overlooking the Mediterranean Basin, represents a “*Cultural Heritage of Humanity*”.

This recognition by UNESCO values and emphasizes these, long universally appreciated and approved culinary practices as part of a wider popular culture wherein quality, simplicity and healthfulness of autochthonous (native) food products marry with food folkway practices, with territoriality, biodiversity and with full respect and regard for seasonality. All these attributes co-jointly acquire a determining and characterizing role as a reference point for excellence.

What is the “Mediterranean Diet”? Several authors recognise that this diet is based on the following dietetic pattern [1]:

- a) high intake of vegetables, pulses (beans, lentils etc), fruit and cereals;
- b) medium-high intake of fish;
- c) low intake of meat and saturated fat;
- d) high intake of unsaturated fat (particularly olive oil);
- e) medium-low intake of dairy produces (mainly yogurt and cheese),
- f) a moderate intake of wine.

This is the dietetic pattern common to many Mediterranean Countries, but in this historical period in which food consumption is characterised by products produced at the industrial level (think of globalization and mass production), is it still useful to speak about this diet? The answer is yes, if we consider that it may fade typical regional identity and membership profiles, tending towards a depersonalization of the authentic eno-gastronomic folkways and customs, and, to counteract this, the UNESCO takes sides in defence of genuineness,

flavour, food taste and chiefly health promotion in order to promote healthy eating habits, handing over the legitimized sceptre to “Our” peculiar food tradition as well as to our benevolent good-nature.

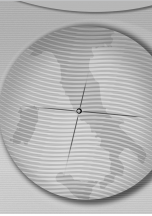
Into this framework, credit is due to the remarks produced through epidemiological research – and an ethnological one at that: this research has “paid attention to human habits, diversity and geographical distribution” [2] that, in the guise of physiologist researcher Ancel Keys, first disclosed the virtues of the “Mediterranean Diet” and hence ‘he’ perceived and communicated its beneficial and protective effects [3].

The large epidemiological study – conducted among seven Nations – “*Seven Countries Study*” [3] resulted in high geographical variability concerning incidence rates for cardiovascular diseases: Regions considered from the Mediterranean Basin reported, with respect to Northern Europe and USA, a lower incidence of cardiovascular diseases (CHD) [4, 5].

Populations that follow the Mediterranean diet pattern show a 50% lower rate of cardiovascular mortality due to cardiovascular disease and show highest longevity [6].

Actually, cardiovascular diseases are the main cause of death and avoidable death in the industrialized countries and this risk is associated with and amplified by obesity, that in turn is a risk factor for other chronic diseases, such as diabetes, hypertension, dyslipidemia, cancers, respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, stroke and myocardial infarction.

The WHO considers obesity as one of the main public health problems and being overweight as a global epidemic of great dimension. The increasing trend of obesity and overweight in the world is related to unhealthy diet patterns: in the last decades, Italian lifestyles have become more “westernized”, and with the highest consumption of meat and animal fats.



The Mediterranean diet is not only a diet: it is a culture, a tradition, a high quality and sustainable “art”. There is evidence that the traditional Mediterranean diet is a dietary model mainly followed in rural zones and mainly by older age classes, due to both a higher attention to their health status and to their bonds with traditional foods. So, the aim is to achieve the highest adherence to this type of diet by younger age groups, and this goal must be reached using all the tools we have available now and in the future, at the European level [7, 8]: the research, the training, the health care, the prevention, through the use of specific nutritional campaigns, in order to divulge the Mediterranean Diet really as a cultural patrimony for humanity.

And we know right now from research that the Mediterranean diet can be promoted even in Northern and Central Europe countries [10,11], and in particular using not only the co-operation with parents, that is assumed to be one way to lead to a stabilization of newly learned behavior [11], but also using new communication tools, such as the Internet [12]. Thanks now to the involvement of UNESCO, that recognises the point recently raised by the Istanbul Declaration of the World federation of Public Health Associations [13] that “The rights and the healthy traditions and cultures of indigenous people and communities need to be recognised, respected, promoted and protected”, these goals may be achieved.

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