

## Spices - Mediterranean Diet's Key To Good Health

Over the past decade much has been made of the so-called Mediterranean Diet. Epidemiological evidence shows that people living in Mediterranean countries like France, Greece and Italy have lower incidences of heart disease relative to the USA, UK and more northerly European nations. Various hypotheses have been put forward in an attempt to explain why their diets should afford protection against cardiovascular disease and other degenerative conditions. Two factors that have been given credit for the healthy attributes of this diet are red wine and olive oil. However, until recently one of the most important factors has been overlooked – the consumption in this region of considerable quantities of culinary herbs and spices that are all rich in antioxidants and other important disease-preventing compounds. The people of the Mediterranean countries, when following their traditional diets, tend to eat less animal-derived saturated fats and more plant-based unsaturated fats (especially those found in olive oil) than those living in other Western countries. In addition they eat less meat and more fish, vegetables, whole grains, legumes and fruit than their less healthy neighbors. These are all important dietary factors that are now being promoted by the medical profession and governments of countries like the USA that have particularly high incidences of heart disease. However, there are other foods that contribute to the favorable health status of those societies that adhere to a Mediterranean-type diet. Red wine has high levels of important antioxidants like resveratrol that help to reduce the amount of arterial damage caused by a diet high in saturated fat. The fact that some Mediterranean countries boast very high levels of red wine consumption has been put forward by some scientists as the reason for the health promoting properties of the Mediterranean Diet. Other researchers have pointed out that olive oil is also consumed in large quantities in this region. Although it is well accepted that olive oil and other monounsaturated oils do protect against cardiovascular disease, recent analysis of extra virgin olive oil has shown that it also contains significant quantities of a phytochemical called oleocanthal that is thought to have aspirin-like cardioprotective effects. Although there are indeed important protective compounds in red wine and olive oil, what is often overlooked is the large quantity and variety of important spices (in this context the term 'spices' includes all culinary herbs) used on a daily basis in the recipes of this region. Garlic, oregano, parsley, rosemary, caraway, coriander, cumin, parsley, sage and thyme are some of the staple herbs and spices that have been used for thousands of years in many traditional Mediterranean dishes. As a food group, spices have properties that are probably more effective at preventing cancer, cardiovascular and other diseases than red wine or olive oil. One of the reasons is that spices have the highest antioxidant activity of all food types. Five of the 50 top antioxidant foods analyzed in the USA, are spices and of those 50 antioxidant foods an amazing 25% are spices! Interestingly, the spice that heads the list of all these foods is oregano, a spice that originates from the Mediterranean region. Oregano has four times the antioxidant activity of one of the most potent antioxidant fruits, the blueberry. All the other spices that are indigenous to the Mediterranean region like coriander, cumin, capers, rosemary, thyme, tarragon, marjoram, fenugreek, mustard and others also have high levels of anti-oxidant activity. In addition to their cardioprotective effects these spices may help to protect against cancer, Alzheimer's disease and fenugreek, for instance, can help to lower and control blood sugar in Type 2 diabetes. Therefore, if you want to benefit from the Mediterranean Diet, drink a glass of red wine or red grape juice a day, use olive oil in your salad dressings and cooking; eat wholegrain foods, fruit and vegetables; eat more fish and less meat. But don't forget to add liberal quantities of oregano, thyme, rosemary, parsley, sage, caraway, coriander, cumin and other spices to your food for they are the real disease-fighting stalwarts of the Mediterranean diet.

## About the Author

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