

MEDITERRANEAN DIET: THE RIGHT WAY TO LONGEVITY?

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The Mediterranean Diet (MD) is not a trendy diet to lose weight in a few days or weeks but a set of knowledge, social habits and cultural traditions historically handed down by the populations that overlook the Mediterranean basin, which since November 2010 UNESCO, for its historical roots and proven scientific bases, it has recognized as "the intangible heritage of humanity". This important recognition is based on the principle that: "this simple and frugal way of eating meals has favored intercultural contacts over time and conviviality, giving life to a formidable body of knowledge, social customs and traditional celebrations of many populations of the Mediterranean". The Mediterranean Diet is a set of skills, knowledge, practices and traditions ranging from the landscape to the table (1). That is to say, an anthropological model that revolves around the complex culture of food that the Mediterranean countries have created and transmitted over the centuries. Traditions handed down from generation to generation and knowledge preserved and elaborated over time. An anthropological unicum that deserves to be known, imitated, innovated and delivered to future generations, based on elements of a food code that transforms the table into a metaphorical space constantly rebuilt and refounded, because if it is true that the Mediterranean diet has been brought into table for millennia, it is true that only in the last twenty years has been identified as a strategic asset to develop health and economy that makes food the signal of a general transformation of attitudes, feelings and collective responsibility towards not only the individual but also of nature and living species (1,2).

It is also the recognition of a "Mediterranean lifestyle", which involves different cultural, ethnic and religious baggage, which involves different social and economic status, with a diversified agricultural production with different food choices (1-3). The first scholar who brought the concept of "Mediterranean Diet" to the attention of science was Ancel Keys (1904-2004) expert in epidemiology and nutritionist at the University of Minnesota School of Public Health. To the American Ancel Keys should be recognized the great merit of having demonstrated, with the Seven Countries Study - the largest epidemiological research project in the history of nutrition started in the '50s - the health benefits of this lifestyle, as well as having invented (in the Latin sense of the word *invenire*, which means discovering, recognizing, finding), together with his wife, biologist of the Mayo Foundation, Margaret Haney, the term Mediterranean diet (4). And since he appoints *sunt consequentia rerum*, precisely the fact of having baptized this lifestyle with a proper name, has triggered a process of recognition and identification of this specific cultural heritage, without which the Mediterranean peoples would have continued to live following this style of life, but continuing to ignore its uniqueness (1).

Ancel Keys was the promoter of the largest epidemiological study ever done in the field of nutrition fifty years ago: the Seven Countries Study. In seven countries (the USA, the Netherlands, Greece, Finland, Japan, Italy and the former Yugoslavia) selected across the globe, the diet of about 12,000 people was compared (5-7). An important conclusion of this study, with the reduction of blood cholesterol, a recognized major risk factor for this disease (lipoprotein cholesterol) was not known at that time. Later work, however, has been shown to be a cholesterol-lowering diet, but has a range of beneficial health effects (3). The results of this impressive research led Keys to baptize the Mediterranean Diet as the best way of life to live better and longer. Not surprisingly, in fact, Ancel and Margaret Keys published, after their shared scientific experience, two very successful books: *Eat Well and Stay Well* in 1959(8) and *How to Eat Well and Stay Well: The Mediterranean Way* in 1975(9).

In these pages the general public read for the first time the expression Mediterranean Diet, used by them with the purpose of countering the fashion of slimming diets, senseless and hyper-protein. While scientific journals had to wait until 1985, because this term entered the scientific lexicon, thanks to an article written by Anna Ferro Luzzi and Mario Mancini (10). All processed data were then confirmed in subsequent research by Keys himself (11) and Mancini (12). Among the populations of the Mediterranean basin, which mainly fed pasta, fruit and vegetables, moderate quantities of fish and used almost exclusively olive oil as a condiment, the mortality rate for ischemic heart disease was much lower than in countries such as Finland and the USA, where the daily diet included many saturated fats of animal origin (butter, lard, milk, cheese, red meat) and led Ancel Keys to define the Mediterranean Diet as the best "lifestyle" to live better and more for a long time, making it popular all over the world (6,7).

There is not in fact a single Mediterranean diet, but a common "Mediterranean" diet and cultural pattern, a model highlighted and theorized in a path that has lasted for sixty years, which has these main characteristics:

- plenty of fresh and seasonal vegetable foods, such as: vegetables, fresh and dried fruit, legumes, bread and pasta from non-reconstituted wholemeal flour and other whole grains such as barley, spelled, oats that ensure both a low Index Glycemic (IG) that a high balancing and satiating factor;
- use of olive oil as the main source of fats;
- fish, white meat and eggs, consumed a few times a week;
- reduced intake of red meat and sausages;
- daily but moderate consumption of cheese and dairy yoghurt from grazing animals, rich in omega 3 fatty acids and antioxidant vitamins;
- moderate intake of wine, mainly red, during meals;
- very low consumption of sweets and refined sugars (3,13-16) (Fig 1)