

The Mediterranean diet for preventing breast cancer

Richard Béliveau

Translated from Le Journal de Montréal, April 03, 2017

A Dutch study, performed for the World Cancer Research Fund, showed that adoption of a Mediterranean diet reduced the risk of developing hormone-independent breast cancer by 40%.

From a scientific point of view, that which we call the “**Mediterranean diet**” refers to the eating habits of people living in the south of Italy and Greece between the years 1950 to 1960. It consists of a fairly frugal diet, principally vegetarian, which is characterized by:

1. An abundant consumption of plant-based products such as grains, vegetables, fruits, beans and nuts.
2. Relatively high levels of fatty acids both monounsaturated (olive oil) and polyunsaturated (omega-6 and omega-3), but low in saturated fats.
3. A moderate consumption of fish, dairy and poultry.
4. A low consumption of red meat, cured meats and sweets.

Another good thing about the Mediterranean diet is that it lacks industrially processed foods, which contain significant quantities of added sugar, saturated or trans-fats and salt. Overall, it is a style of eating which is practically the antithesis of the diet consumed by North Americans, where the majority of calories are provided by processed foods, meat and added sugar.

GOOD FOR THE HEALTH

Numerous studies have clearly shown that following a Mediterranean diet is associated with a notable decrease in several chronic diseases, including cardiovascular diseases and type 2 diabetes. One of the best examples showing this protective effect is the randomized study called PREDIMED (Prevencion con Dieta Mediterranea) which was able to demonstrate that following a Mediterranean diet rich in extra-virgin olive oil or nuts reduced, by about 30%, the risk of developing these diseases as well as certain vascular problems such as peripheral artery disease¹.

Bear in mind that randomized studies are generally used in the development of medications: they are very reliable, but are generally too expensive to be used for studies on prevention, which makes the study cited here even more valuable because it confirms the results from other population studies which were not randomized.



More recently, it has been observed that women aged 60 to 80 who participated in this study were much less likely to develop breast cancer, with a risk decreasing by 40% in the group who received nuts as a dietary supplement and by 70% in the group receiving supplements of olive oil².

The drastic decrease in the risk of breast cancer observed with adoption of the Mediterranean diet thus strongly indicates that this style of eating can play a major role in the prevention of this cancer.

BREAST CANCERS

The preventative effects of the Mediterranean diet can be seen in the results of another study performed with 62,573 Dutch women aged 55 to 69³. By examining the incidence of breast cancer within this cohort over a period of 20 years, the researchers observed that the women who followed a Mediterranean diet had a risk of developing hormone-independent breast cancer (which does not express an estrogen receptor) 40% lower than those who did not adopt this diet.

These observations are very interesting because the hormone-independent cancers often have a bad prognosis due to their very rapid growth and their aggressive clinical evolution. The identification of a preventative effect by the Mediterranean diet against this type of very invasive breast cancer could thus prove to be of great importance in reducing the burden imposed by this disease.

- (1) Martínez-González MA *et al.* Benefits of the Mediterranean diet: insights from the PREDIMED study. *Prog. Cardiovasc. Dis.* 2015;58:50-60.
- (2) Toledo E *et al.* Mediterranean diet and invasive breast cancer risk among women at high cardiovascular risk in the PREDIMED trial: a randomized clinical trial. *JAMA Intern. Med.* 2015;175:1752-1760.
- (3) Van den Brandt PA and Schulpen M. Mediterranean diet adherence and risk of postmenopausal breast cancer: results of a cohort study and meta-analysis. *Int. J. Cancer*, published online March 6 2017.