

Eat better to improve one's health!

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Two recent studies from Harvard University show that an improvement in the quality of one's diet, even a small one, results in significant decrease in the risk of premature death.

As a consequence of the **Internet**, there seems to exist today ever more confusion about what is actually healthy to eat.

For some people, it is necessary to completely ban gluten, fat or even sugar; for others, it is actually meat, dairy products or even grains which are guilty and which must be eliminated from our diet.

OVERVIEW

The principal reason for this confusion is that we pay far too much attention to individual nutrients (sugars, fats, proteins, vitamins and fibre) rather than to the overall eating habits.

We do not eat molecules in some isolated fashion, but rather in an ensemble of foods containing myriad elements which will interact with each other and mutually influence the impact of each on the human body.

In reality, the great scientific studies of the past 40 years are consistent and clearly show that to eat well is not at all so complicated: it is essential to adopt a diet based on whole foods, principally of plant origin, to limit the consumption of animal products and to eliminate, as much as possible, the industrially processed products.

One finds these characteristics, for example, in the Mediterranean diet.

DECREASING MORTALITY

The potential of this approach can be seen by the results of two studies performed by the group of Dr. Frank Hu of Harvard University.

In the first study, published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*¹, the researchers of this group examined variations in the eating habits of 73,739 people over a period of 12 years (1998-2010) and correlated improvements in the quality of the diet with the risk of premature death.

They found that the participants who had improved the quality of their dining habits during this period, notably by increasing the consumption of vegetables, whole grains and omega-3 fatty acids, saw their risk of mortality decrease by about 15% compared to those who did not make these changes.

Inversely, a decrease in the quality of the diet was associated with an increase of 6 to 12% in the risk of mortality.

A striking result produced by this study is that the protection provided by a better diet does not require a complete turnaround in our eating habits.

According to the authors, the simple act of adding a daily portion of nuts and beans while reducing, in parallel, the use of red meats and cured meats is enough to diminish the risk of death.



So there is no need to adopt an extreme diet to improve health: increasing the consumption of plant-based foods while diminishing those derived from animal sources, thanks to a Mediterranean diet for example, already represents a step in the right direction.

WISELY CHOOSE THE PLANT-BASED FOODS

Increasing the consumption of plant-based foods is important, but one is not necessarily eating wisely simply by avoiding meat.

A trio of vegetarian sausages made of industrially processed soya with fries and a soft drink does not contain any meat, but it's safe to say that it is not a healthy diet.

This problem is well illustrated by the results from another study from the group at Harvard involving 209,298 subjects².

By examining the incidence of coronary diseases in this population, the researchers observed that people who adopted a diet rich in plant-based foods such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains and nuts had a lower risk (25%) of cardiovascular events than did those who consumed foods of animal origin.

In contrast, for vegetarians who did not regularly eat vegetables and who preferred less healthy foods such as industrially processed vegetarian meals, refined flours, potatoes and sugared items (desserts, soft drinks), this protection disappeared completely and was replaced by an increase of 32% in the risk of coronary disease.

To remain healthy, vegetarians should thus not be content to simply shun meat and other animal products, but to well and truly increase their overall intake of plant-based foods.

PHYSICAL AND MENTAL WELL-BEING

These studies show once more the extent to which an improvement in the quality of our diet, even a relatively small one, can result in positive effects on health and improve life expectancy.

This is true both for our physical as well as for our mental well-being. In the SMILES study (*Supporting Modification of lifestyle in Lower Emotional States*), it was observed that, for patients suffering from moderate to severe depression, the adoption of a Mediterranean diet for just 12 weeks reduced the depressive symptoms, improved mood and increased the level of remission³.

This is remarkable! Feeding is not simply an action which serves only to provide for our biological need to survive; it is more a pillar of our health, indispensable for a life that is long and happy.

⁽¹⁾ Sotos-Prieto, M et al. Association of changes in diet quality with total and cause-specific mortality. *N. Engl. J. Med.* 2017;377:143-153.

⁽²⁾ Satija, A et al. Healthful and unhealthful plant-based diets and the risk of coronary heart disease in U.S. adults. *J. Am. Coll. Cardiol.* 2017;70:411-422.

⁽³⁾ Jacka, FN et al. A randomized controlled trial of dietary improvement for adults with major depression (the 'SMILES' trial). *BMC Med.* 2017;15:23.