

Sounds Greek, but can a Med diet trim the tummy?

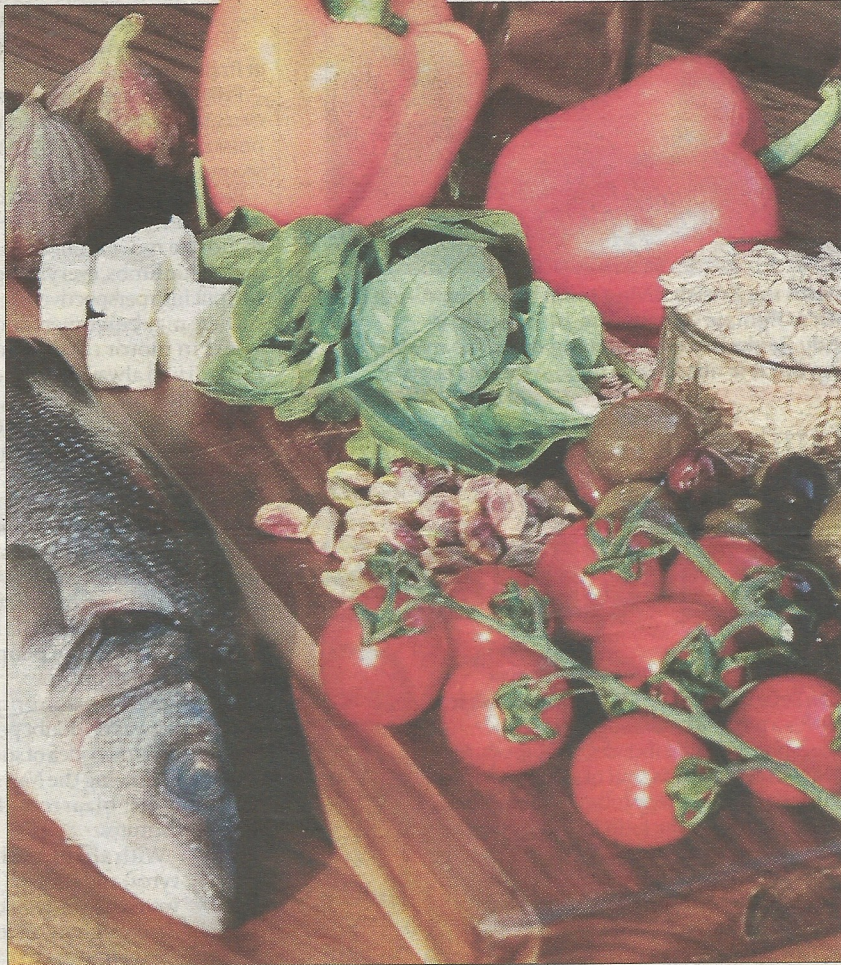
Why is it in the news?

A study has found people could lose more weight by following a Mediterranean diet than a low-fat diet. A team of researchers conducted a two-year trial in Israel, splitting 322 overweight people into groups and putting them on different diets, including low-fat and Mediterranean. The Mediterranean diet was made up of vegetables, fish and poultry and had little red meat. It was high in fibre and contained monounsaturated fats such as olive oil and nuts. On average, those on the low-fat diet lost seven pounds, while those on the Mediterranean lost 10.

What do we know?

The study, published earlier this month in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, also noted that women responded particularly well to the Mediterranean diet – on average, they lost just a quarter of a pound on the low-fat diet, but a size-dropping 13 pounds on the Mediterranean. Previous

studies suggest the Mediterranean diet can ward off a mind-boggling array of illnesses – it has been credited with cutting the risk of birth defects, cancer, Alzheimer's, arthritis, heart disease, diabetes, asthma, allergies and pulmonary disease. Mediterranean countries love their diet so much that four of them – Italy, Greece, Morocco and Spain – have recently banded together and applied to UNESCO to have it included on the world heritage list.



JAS LEHAL

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Why is the study controversial?

Because the Mediterranean diet is often thought of as being high in fat and calories. How many times have we marvelled enviously at French women's ability to stay thin despite all that cheese, or wondered how Italians are able to eat all that pasta and sauce and still manage to look trim?

Well, it's the portions that keep them looking fit, says the British Dietetic Association's Sue Baic. "Of course, if you drown your food in olive oil, the calories are quite high," she says. "But Mediterranean dishes tend to use small amounts for dressing and cooking."

What does it mean for me?

If you're looking to bring a bikini bod back from your Mediterranean holiday, try bringing back some food habits as well. The good thing about the diet is that it's varied, so it's easy to follow, whereas sticking to a low-fat or low-carb diet proves too hard for many. Adopting a Mediterranean

diet could also be healthier – you don't have to be overweight to suffer from high cholesterol, heart disease, cancer and other ailments.

What should I do?

The key to the Mediterranean diet is that most of the fat comes from monounsaturated fats instead of saturated fats. All fat has the same amount of calories, but monounsaturated fats are healthier. Try swapping your crisps for a few nuts or seeds. Switch to whole-grain breads, pasta and rice, and eat plenty of fruit and vegetables. And maybe fit in a "research" trip to southern Europe!

JOANNE CHRISTIE



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