**Assignment 4: Mediterranean Diet**

The Mediterranean diet has been studied extensively ¹ in the last 10 years and many people now think of it as a heart healthy diet. The one ingredient that many people have caught on to is olive oil being a healthy fat; the fat to use instead of butter when cooking. The Mediterranean diet is just so much more than that, and to gain the full benefit of this diet one has to embrace all aspects of this diet.

The Mediterranean diet is first and foremost a diet of variety and balance². It includes starches such as crusty breads, whole grains, potatoes and pastas. It has fresh fruits, vegetables and legumes such as oranges, lemons, grapes, figs, tomatoes, egg plant, avocado, and beans. It includes feta, mozzarella cheeses and yogurt. Mediterranean people eat some fish, other seafood, poultry, a few eggs, and little meat.

First I want to look at olive oil the ingredient that first caught people’s attention during   
“the Seven Countries Study”³. Most of the fat in this diet comes from olive oil, nuts and fish. The monounsaturated olive oil is one of the important lessons to learn from this diet as it is used instead of saturated fats found in diets heavy in butter and meats. Breads are dipped in olive oil not spread with butter and meats are used sparingly. Cheeses are used but it is the low fat mozzarella.

Why is that important? First, using a diet low in animal fat decreases the amount of cholesterol consumed. This is a major heart health factor, as too much cholesterol has nowhere to go and gets deposited in the arteries where they cause problems by restricting blood flow and raising blood pressure. Secondly lowering the amount of saturated fat is a benefit because saturated fats cause LDL cholesterol to rise, more cholesterol becomes available that the body potentially do not need. In addition saturated fats can cause problems by promoting blood clotting. Finally, monounsaturated fats found in olive oil are in addition to replacing saturated fats helpful in two other ways; first they are not atherogenic as are saturated fats, and two, and this pertains especially to olive oil which contain phytochemicals that appears to help to protect against heart disease. Polyunsaturated fats found in fish and nuts have additional benefits as well.

Equally important is the low amounts of Hydrogenated fats in this diet as a result of its very low content of processed foods. Cakes and other processed products are not part of the daily diet; they are only eaten at special occasions. Hydrogenated fats despite their double bond(s) act similar in the body to saturated fats and raise LDL cholesterol levels. At high intake they even lower “the good Cholesterol” the HDL cholesterol level. In other words they cause a diminished ability of the body to pick-up extra cholesterol from the blood stream for reuse or excretion. In addition, not eating processed foods limits excess salt and sugar often hidden in these foods.

Again, it is not only the positive effects of the mono- and polyunsaturated/saturated fat ratio of the Mediterranean diet that makes it successful. It is its high content of vegetables, fruits and legumes with their important sources of vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, and fibers. It is the usage of wild plants and snails. It is that the animals used for food have grazed rather than been feed corn. It is the balance of carbohydrate, fats and protein. It is also the culture surrounding foods. One (1) the Mediterranean diet use fresh, seasonal whole foods that are prepared using simple methods¹. And two (2) they emphasize gathering around a meal and eating it leisurely and with good company. And finally exercise is a natural component of the Mediterranean people’s lives.

The thing that struck me most about the Mediterranean diet was the fact that it was not the amount of fat as much as the type of fat consumed that caused this diet to benefit compared to other countries diets. As found in the “Seven Countries Study”³ the people in Finland consuming the same high percentage of fat but animal fat rather than plant fat found in the Mediterranean diet saw a marked difference in rates of heart disease deaths. The Mediterranean diet not only lowers the incidence of heart disease, it also lower some cancers, other chronic inflammatory diseases, and increases life expectancy.

Ref.:

1. <http://www.webmd.com/food-recipes/guide/the-mediterranean-diet>
2. <http://oldwayspt.org/resources/heritage-pyramids/mediterranean-diet-pyramid/med-diet-health>
3. Highlight 5