

# "DOCTOR AT SEA" a monthly Column in The Islander Magazine

## Med. Diet

A friend in England emailed me recently to say that I would not need to write this column much longer because everyone will have left after my dire warnings over the summer about excessive sun on the land and the growing threat of jellyfish stings in the sea! So this month I am focussing on the benefits of good food and (some) red wine.

In July, Spain launched a drive in Brussels to win European support for a bid to include the traditional Mediterranean diet on a UN list of protected world cultural treasures and has already gained support from Portugal. Spain wants the diet based on olive oil, fish and vegetables to be the first diet on the UNESCO list of traditions, festivals, rituals and crafts from around the world which the UN body certifies as part of a unique cultural heritage. Most of us have heard of the list of World Heritage Sites but probably few have heard of this compilation of so-called "intangible treasures" and Spain is seeking to have the diet included when UNESCO updates the list this year

The Spanish document presented to a meeting of EU agriculture ministers stated that "medical studies found the Mediterranean diet's blend of olive oil, fresh fruit, vegetables and fish, combined with a "moderate" intake of wine provides "a quality nutritional model: rich, varied, balanced, healthy and appetizing" and "it leads to fewer heart problems and a longer life",

It did not mention a Spanish government study released in May that found that half of Spain's adults were overweight or obese. That study did not offer an explanation of why Spaniards are getting heavier, but health experts and doctors often blame sedentary lifestyles dominated by television and computers, and changing dietary habits in which young people eat more junk food.

There is no one "Mediterranean" diet. At least sixteen countries border the Mediterranean Sea but the common Mediterranean dietary pattern has these characteristics:

- high consumption of fruits, vegetables, bread and other cereals, potatoes, beans, nuts and seeds
- olive oil is an important source of "good" mono-unsaturated fat which keeps cholesterol down, and also contains antioxidants which slow down the hardening of the arteries and blood clot formation.
- dairy products, which contain "bad" saturated fats are only consumed in moderation - eggs are consumed zero to four times a week
- fish and poultry are eaten more often than red meat - red meat has a high content of saturated fat which is associated with heart and circulation diseases.
- wine is consumed in low to moderate amounts - research has suggested that specifically red wine is the most beneficial. The heart protective effect has been attributed to antioxidants present in the skin and seeds of red grapes - consuming a glass of red wine along with a meal may even influence your lipid/cholesterol profiles following that meal

The American Heart Association confirms that this type of Mediterranean-style diet is closest to their dietary recommendations. More than half the fat calories in a Mediterranean diet come from mono-unsaturated fats (mainly from olive oil). The incidence of heart disease in Mediterranean countries is lower than in the United States. Death rates are lower, too - but this may not be entirely due to the diet. Lifestyle factors, such as more physical activity especially amongst the elderly and extended social support systems generally, may also play a part as well as a more relaxed pace reinforced by an afternoon nap or siesta.

So avoid the junk food and too much alcohol but otherwise "when in Rome" or Mallorca.

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