

The Nordic diet: Is it as healthy as the Mediterranean?

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Eating a traditional, balanced Nordic diet was associated with lower death rates in a Danish cohort study, published by researchers from the Danish Cancer Society, Aarhus University and Aalborg Hospital, Denmark.

The Mediterranean diet, traditionally consumed by populations from Southern Europe, is characterised by high intakes of legumes, fruits, cereals, fish, and olive oil, moderate intakes of dairy products and wine, and low intakes of red meat. Such a dietary pattern has been linked with lower risks of disease such as diabetes, heart disease or cancer, and with lower mortality. Adopting the Mediterranean diet has been widely recommended, yet it is difficult to change lifestyles rooted in culture and determined by availability. In Northern Europe, however, traditional eating patterns differ; Modern day Nordic diets, characterised by high intakes of sugar, margarines, high-fat dairy, red meat and low intake of fruit and vegetables, have a negative impact on health; however there are nutritious components of the traditional diet.

The team of Danish researchers analysed diets and mortality of 57,053 Danes aged 50-64 years old, a subset of the Diet, Cancer and Health cohort study (1993-1997).

Diets were assessed, using a Food Frequency Questionnaire, and rated against a healthy Nordic food index (rating 0 (low adherence) to 6 (high adherence)). The index was created based on traditional foods that are also considered to have health-promoting effects: fish, cabbages, rye bread, oatmeal, apples and pears, and root vegetables.

In the 12 year follow-up, 4126 of the participants died. Diets achieving a higher point on the index score were associated with significantly lower mortality rate ratios (in men and women; 0.96 MRR, 4% lower mortality rate, after adjustment for confounding).

Separate analysis for each food item with mortality, suggested strongest benefits of whole grain rye bread for men, and also, cabbages (for men and women), and root vegetables (for women), i.e. those who ate these foods had lived longer.

This study shows it is possible to achieve a healthful diet that promotes longevity, within a cultural context, in this population based on traditional Nordic foods.

For further information:

[Olsen A et al. \(2011\). Healthy Aspects of the Nordic Diet Are Related to Lower Total Mortality. Journal of Nutrition 141\(4\):639-644.](#)