

Mediterranean diet 'cuts risk of breast cancer'

Risk of deadly type of disease may be cut by 40% Women's eating habits tracked over two decades

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'This adds to evidence that a healthy diet plays a part in lowering risk of the disease'

Eating a Mediterranean diet could help reduce the risk of contracting one of the worst types of breast cancer by 40%, according to a large study funded by the World Cancer Research Fund.

Following the diet, rich in olive oil, fish and fruits, nuts, vegetables and wholegrains, has well-publicised benefits, including reducing the risk of stroke and heart disease.

The study, published today in the *International Journal of Cancer*, suggests it could also significantly cut the chances of women getting oestrogen-receptor (ER) negative breast cancer, a post-menopausal form of the disease, which cannot be treated with hormone therapy.

Lead researcher Prof Piet van den Brandt, from Maastricht University in the Netherlands, said: "Our research can help to shine a light on how dietary patterns can affect our cancer risk.

"We found a strong link between the Mediterranean diet and reduced oestrogen-receptor negative breast cancer risk among postmenopausal women, even in a non-Mediterranean population. This type of breast cancer usually has a worse prognosis than other types of breast cancer."

The researchers examined 62,573 women aged 55 to 69 over two decades. All were participants in the Netherlands cohort study on diet and cancer, which began in 1986. Their diets were tracked to see how closely they followed the Mediterranean pattern, which also has a low intake of red meat, sweets and refined grains such as white bread or white rice.

Traditionally the diet includes moderate consumption of alcohol, but because alcohol is a known risk factor for breast cancer it was excluded from the study. Almost 12,000 cases of breast cancer could be prevented in the UK each year if nobody drank alcohol, previous research suggests.

Of the women studied, 3,354 contracted breast cancer but 1,033 of the cases were not included in the analysis because the women had a history of breast cancer and/ or had incomplete or inconsistent dietary data. The analysis looked at the different components of the Mediterranean diet individually, concluding that nut intake was most strongly inversely associated with ER negative breast cancer, followed by fruit consumption and eating fish.

The researchers concluded that, assuming causality, if everyone ate the highest defined Mediterranean diet, about a third (32.4%) of ER negative breast cancer cases and 2.3% of all breast cancer cases could be avoided.

They said their findings were confirmed in a meta-analysis of cohort studies.

Dr Panagiota Mitrou, the World Cancer Research Fund's director of research funding, said it was an important study. "With breast cancer being so common in the UK, prevention is key if we want to see a decrease in the number of women developing the disease," he added. "We would welcome fur-

ther research that helps us better understand the risk factors for the different breast cancer subtypes.”

Breast cancer is the most common cancer among UK women, with more than 53,000 new cases each year. A small study published last year and presented at a meeting of the American Society of Clinical Oncology suggested eating a Mediterranean diet may help prevent breast cancer returning.

Emma Pennery, clinical director at the charity Breast Cancer Care, said the new study was intriguing. She added: “We know how devastating a diagnosis is and this study adds to evidence that a healthy diet, full of ‘good’ low-saturated fats, plays a part in lowering risk of the disease.

“However, it’s important to remember while lifestyle choices like eating a wellbalanced diet and taking regular exercise can help reduce the risk of cancer, they don’t guarantee prevention. So it’s crucial women know the signs and symptoms of breast cancer, and contact their GP with any concerns.”

People with heart disease in the UK are already recommended to follow a Mediterranean diet. Public Health England has said the diet is similar to the official UK advice, which recommends cutting back on sugary, fatty and salty food and drinks.