



**nz nutrition  
FOUNDATION**

**Committee for Healthy Ageing  
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Welcome to Issue 20 of our Bulletin, updating you on issues of importance or topical interest relating to nutrition and physical activity of older people. In this issue, we take a closer look at the Mediterranean Diet

## **THE ROLE OF NUTRITION IN ACTIVE AND HEALTHY AGEING – THE MEDITERRANEAN DIET**

Earlier this year, a science and policy report on the role of Nutrition in Active and Healthy Ageing was published by the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission. The aim of the report is to provide evidence-based scientific support to the Commission in its policy making, but in itself, does not imply a policy position.

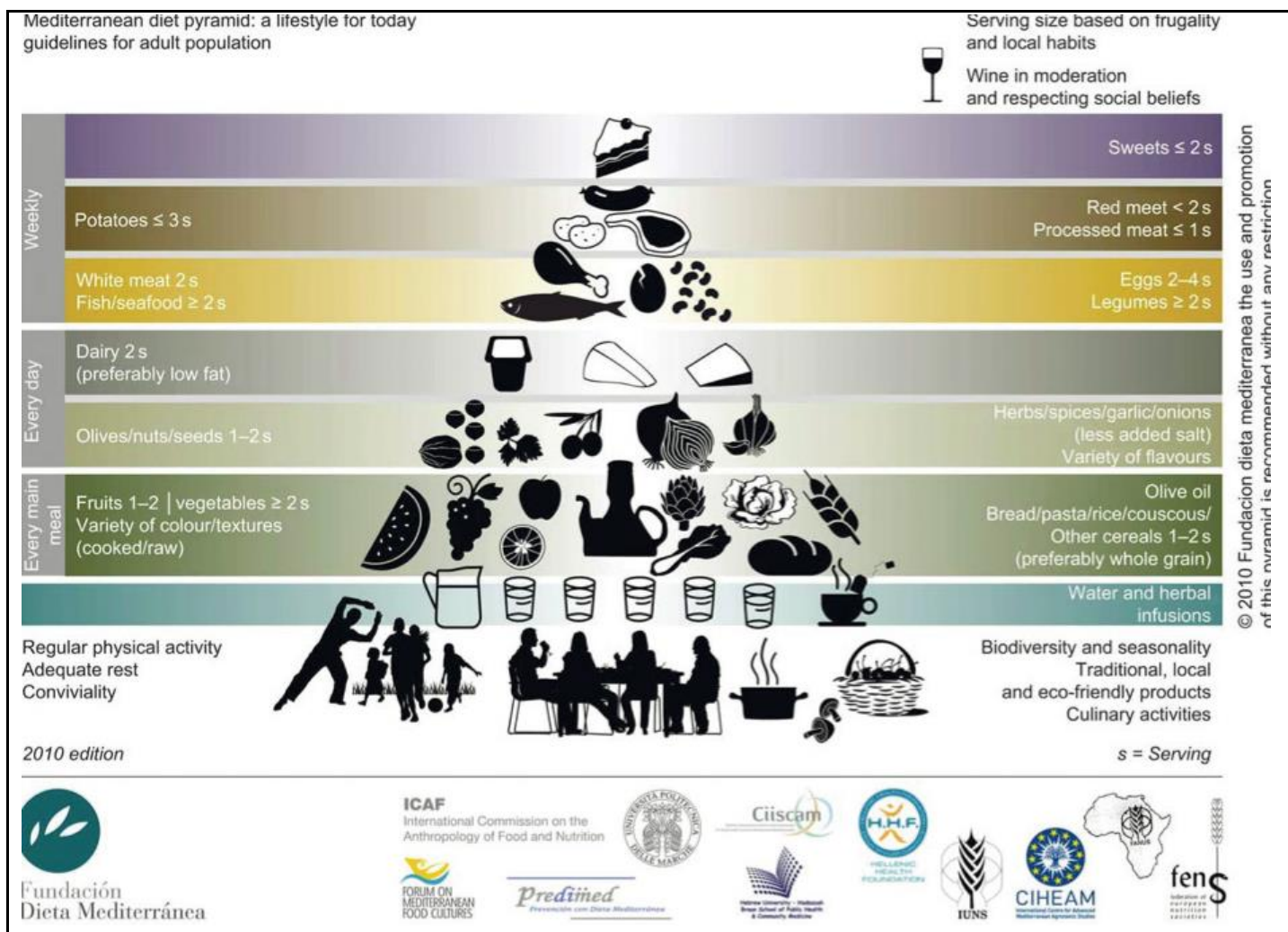
The report, 54 pages long, focuses on three main issues:

- Determinants of active and healthy ageing, which include economic determinants, health and social service elements, the physical environment, the social environment, cultural and personal determinants, and behavioural determinants. These six important factors and the interplay between them and their relationships with food and dietary behaviours will predict how well people age.
- Undernutrition and functional decline in ageing, including mobility, sensory changes, eyesight, oral health, gastro-intestinal functions and health, cognitive functions, and chronic diseases and age-related illnesses. Undernutrition is common in older people, as a result of reduced nutrient intake and/or impaired metabolism, and is associated with a number of age-related complications, diseases and mortality in developed countries.
- The role of diet in active and healthy ageing includes a review of macronutrients, and water and energy; and micronutrients, phytochemicals, probiotics and prebiotics; and the effectiveness of nutritional supplementation on age-related disease prevention and treatment from clinical trials is reviewed. Finally, the Mediterranean diet as a whole diet and the evidence in reducing mortality rates and chronic disease risks is discussed.

The report is very comprehensive and well worth reading by those who are interested in the topic. It raises readers' awareness of diet as a key contributor to healthy ageing, and the need for more attention to be given to diet and nutrition in policy-making to protect our older citizens.

To read the full report, see <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/publication/eur-scientific-and-technical-research-reports/role-nutrition-active-and-healthy-ageing-prevention-and-treatment-age-related-diseases>

In this article, we take a closer look at the Mediterranean Diet as a food-based approach to good nutrition. The evidence reviewed in the report has not yet conclusively demonstrated that micronutrient supplementation provides all the answers for older adults in combating age-related physical and mental conditions, especially if they are at risk of deficiency. It is therefore critical to obtain adequate levels of nutrients through diet.



The Mediterranean Diet is graphically represented above

The Mediterranean Diet is suggested to confer health benefits such as reducing the risk of developing type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, some neurodegenerative diseases and certain diet-related cancers. A recent Cochrane review found that there were some favourable effects seen on cardiovascular risk factors, especially when more components of the diet were embraced. The diagram above illustrates the main principles of the Mediterranean diet, but also emphasises healthy lifestyle behaviours and adapting to the various geographical, socio-economic and cultural contexts of the Mediterranean region – such as

conviviality, seasonality of the diet, food preparation and the use of traditional, local and eco-friendly products.

The evidence suggests that besides reducing cardiovascular risk, adherence to the diet increases longevity in several European populations, and in the UK and Sweden as well, when the main principles of the diet were applied in the studies. Large multi-country studies have also observed positive findings. One study – the European Prospective Investigation into Cancer and Nutrition (EPIC) found in a prospective study of over 74000 older adults in nine European countries, participants who adhered to the diet had lower mortality rates. Using a point scoring system (0-18) for Mediterranean Diet adherence, for every 2-point increase in adherence score, there was an 8% reduction in overall mortality risk and a 10% reduction in CVD risk in a meta-analysis including over 4 million subjects. In the HALE (Healthy Ageing: a Longitudinal study in Europe) study, 2500 healthy older men and women in 11 European countries were followed for 10 years. This study found those adhering to the Mediterranean diet had a lower risk of all-cause mortality, and when the diet was combined with three other lifestyle factors – moderate alcohol consumption, physical activity and not smoking, the rate of all-cause and cause-specific mortality was reduced by more than 50%.

There is also evidence to suggest that adherence to the Mediterranean diet is related to better cognition in older people. A meta-analysis of five prospective cohort studies with at least one-year follow up showed participants in the high adherence group had 33% lower risk for both Alzheimers Disease and mild cognitive impairment. Another meta-analysis including case control studies, prospective cohort studies and cross-sectional studies looked at the association between the Mediterranean diet and a number of brain related conditions. This showed high adherence strongly associated with reduced risk for stroke, depression and cognitive impairment.

In summary, the research described in this report indicates there is vast potential to focus further on promoting health through adequate intake from diet in the older age group. At this stage, limited benefit is seen with supplementing single nutrients in older people to prevent or treat specific cognitive or functional impairments. Ensuring proper nutrition in older people by maximising their intake of essential vitamins, minerals and bioactive compounds from natural food sources is supported. The Mediterranean diet as a whole diet approach to promote health, increase longevity and reduce the risks of various age-related diseases supports this premise in a number of observational studies.

The NZ Nutrition Foundation's recent "Food not Nutrients" symposium presenter, Dr David Katz, endorses this message. He says "Eat wholesome foods in sensible combinations, and let the nutrients take care of themselves." He suggests lifestyle is key to reducing the risk of chronic diseases, and describes lifestyle behaviours as Fork (eating well); Feet (incorporating physical activity); and Fingers (stopping smoking). These, along with being a healthy weight, can result in an 80% reduction of risk. He proposes that we do have knowledge of these messages, but that we need to put this knowledge into action.

This message was also endorsed in Professor Jim Mann's editorial in the October issue Nutrition News, (the Foundation's Newsletter), where in his discussion on the debate between conventional wisdom with regard

to macronutrient intake compared with the 'Paleo' type diet of low carbohydrate, high fat (of any type), he advocates an approach that recommends and emphasises foods and dietary patterns, rather than macronutrient composition of diets. To read this newsletter go to: [www.nutritionfoundation.org.nz/](http://www.nutritionfoundation.org.nz/) where you can also access more information about Dr David Katz and the "Food not Nutrients" symposium.

## LOOK OUT FOR ANTI-AGEING DRINKS!

Older consumers are an untapped market for soft drink manufacturers, according to a leading industry analyst. The older age group is the most rapidly growing sector of the population, and manufacturers have been advised that they need to think of this group as a secure source of sales. Drinks could be a vehicle for functional foods for a segment of the population who want to stay healthy as they age. Already a Swiss firm has created an anti-ageing drink containing pomegranate, cranberry juice and OM24 (from whole green tea leaves). So *Caveat emptor* – buyer beware! We are better off eating a healthy diet and leading an active lifestyle – as discussed above. (see <http://www.foodmanufacture.co.uk/content/view/print/972313> )