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Olive oil helps weight loss, but lifestyle change is key

Eat less, move more.



EMILIO MORENATTI/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS FILES

The Mediterranean diet, with lots of fish, fruits, veggies and oil, can help with weight loss.

That's the best antidote to "lifestyle diseases" filling our hospitals around the world, said Jean-Pierre Després, professor in the kinesiology division of the department of social and preventive medicine at Université Laval.

Canada and other countries are facing an epidemic of heart disease, obesity and diabetes, "a huge wave and burden of societal disease," Després said in a telephone interview from Quebec City.

"For example, there's a perfect storm coming in Asia — there are 114 million individuals with diabetes in China alone. And in the vast majority, lifestyle is to blame," Després said. In Quebec, more than 800,000 are affected by diabetes.

Everyone knows they should eat better and move more, said Després, also scientific director of the

International Chair on Cardiometabolic Risk. "We know the link between overconsumption and disease. But it's not enough. How do we bridge the gap between what we know and what we do?"

That key question, among others, will occupy 400 experts from nutritionists to kinesiologists from around the world at a conference this week in Quebec on cardiometabolic illnesses.

In some cases, the environment itself is hostile. For example, neighbourhoods do not have sidewalks, bike paths or good outdoor lights.

"It's as simple as putting a couple of showers in the workplace," he said, to promote exercise during lunch hour.

Després said he was disheartened by a survey last year showing that fewer than 20 per cent of Canadian family practitioners raised the issue of physical activity with their patients, and less than a third spoke to them about nutrition. "Why? Well, they have waiting rooms filled with patients," he said.

He lauded Quebec's move toward more family medicine network clinics with their interdisciplinary health workers who could identify and target behaviours key to treatment.

Doctors are like "the quarterback of a football team. They can't fix this alone. What's needed is an integrated approach," he said.

More and more doctors are now prescribing physical activity, Després said. "It's symbolic, hearing this from a doctor, 'This is the best medication I can prescribe for you.'"

One of the most powerful risk factors for cardiovascular disease is abdominal fat, irrespective of body weight, noted Després, an expert in metabolic syndrome whose push for waist measurement is now routine medical practice world wide.

Excessive visceral fat, also known as "beer belly" or "pot belly" is linked to heart disease, inflammation, and elevated blood pressure. It has also been linked to bone health, sleep apnea and cancer, Després added.

Just cutting back on sugared beverages will eliminate thousands of empty calories, he said, "what we call the low hanging fruit."

A game-changer in the field, Després added, was a Spanish government-funded study (PREDIMED) looking at the health benefits of adding olive oil and nuts to the traditional Mediterranean diet.

Emilio Ros of Hospital Clínic de Barcelona and lead researcher of PREDIMED who will present results at the conference, spoke to the Montreal Gazette on Thursday. The following interview with Ros was condensed for space reasons.

Q: What is the PREDIMED study?

A: The study was launched in October 2003. It recruited 7,500 people at high risk of cardiovascular disease, they suffered from diabetes or three or more risk factors ... smoking, high cholesterol and hypertension. They were divided into three groups. The control group was asked to cut the fat out of their Mediterranean diet, while the other two groups were asked to add either olive oil to their daily intake of food or a mixture of walnuts, almonds and hazelnuts.

Q: What happened?

A: After a five-year follow up the study was stopped because of the evidence — a reduction of 30 per cent of cardiovascular disease and death in those using olive oil and nuts. But the control group deteriorated with age-related illnesses. It's important to note that the average age of participants at the start was 67. So it's never too late to change your diet to improve your health.

Q: What else was observed?

A: We saw a drop in diabetes of almost 40 per cent. But only in the olive oil group. In those with metabolic syndrome, we saw a reversal of symptoms, as well as drop in waist measurements, or abdominal fat, by an average of two centimetres. (Eating good fat) reduced belly fat without adding weight — which is right along the theme of this conference. It was a redistribution of fat in the body. It wasn't an enormous effect but it was enough — part of several factors that had a positive influence on health. We saw a reduction in cholesterol and blood pressure, an improvement in insulin sensitivity, we saw a reduction in inflammatory proteins ... many of the mechanisms involved in metabolic syndrome. I have to say that food is extremely potent, as potent as medication.

Q: That's impressive. What else?

A: Follow-up with a subgroup showed improvements in cognition and memory. So olive oil and the Mediterranean diet could play a role in the prevention of neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimers. Every two years we re-evaluate the participants. There's more data coming and there may also be a link to cancer risk reduction.

Q: Did the low-fat diet trend get it wrong, that fat is bad?

A: Of course. We've demonized fat for the last 40 years as the culprit that feeds obesity. And it's simply not true. Sugar makes you fat. Sugared drinks, pastry, and all that, makes you fat, but not good vegetable oil. There was no weight gain in the group that ate nuts and extra virgin olive oil — in fact they lost waist circumference.

Q: What is a basic Mediterranean regime?

A: It's rich in vegetables, cereals, fruits, and nuts, olive oil is used abundantly at the dinner table. It's also

rich in fish. The classic Mediterranean is weak in red meat, cream and butter. We recommend poultry and turkey, red wine with the meal (for those who drink) and in moderation, two glasses for men, one for women. And obviously we warn against eating sugared foods.

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