

Mediterranean Diet May Benefit Arthritis Sufferers

by Amy Norton

(Reuters Health) - Learning how to eat Mediterranean-style may help people with rheumatoid arthritis improve their symptoms, a study suggests.

The traditional diets of people in the Mediterranean region tend to be high in fruits, vegetables, fish and olive oil, and comparatively low in red meat. A number of studies have linked this style of eating to a lower risk of heart disease, but there has also been some evidence that it's beneficial for people with rheumatoid arthritis, or RA.



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RA is caused by an errant immune system attack on the lining of the joints, which leads to chronic inflammation, pain and stiffness. Some research has suggested that components of the Mediterranean diet, like the healthy fats in olive oil, have anti-inflammatory effects.

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In the new study, published in the *Annals of the Rheumatic Diseases*, UK researchers split 130 women with RA into two groups. One group attended classes on Mediterranean-style eating, which included hands-on cooking instruction. The other group was given written dietary information only.

The researchers found that women who attended the classes bumped up their intake of fruits, vegetables, beans and monounsaturated fat -- the type found in olive oil. What's more, over the next six months they reported improvements in pain, morning stiffness and overall health.

In contrast, women who received only written information made no significant diet changes, as a group. Nor were there any overall symptom improvements, the study found.

The women "undoubtedly" benefited from taking the class rather than simply getting written information, lead study author Dr. Gayle McKellar of Glasgow Royal Infirmary told Reuters Health.

The classes seemed to increase participants' confidence and offered them social interaction as well, according to McKellar and her colleagues. In addition, the women -- who were generally from low-income areas -- were shown how fresh produce and other healthy foods can fit into their budgets, and how to use kitchen aids to overcome any problems with their hand function.

The researchers are planning to study the effects of these "healthy cooking classes" in a larger group, including people with health conditions other than RA.

