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Olive oil may preserve mental health

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FEATURING seasonal fruit and vegetables, oily fish and, above all, a touch of olive oil at every meal, the Mediterranean diet has been lauded by the scientific community for decades. And with good reason, because it's said to help preserve physical and even mental health.



Now, a new study suggests that one of its staples, olive oil, is associated with a reduced risk of death from dementia.

Although health professionals and scientists have been extolling the virtues of the vegan diet in recent years, it still hasn't managed to replace the Mediterranean diet in terms of health benefits.

Renowned for its variety of foods, rich in seasonal produce and low in refined products and red meat, this diet, also known as the "Cretan diet", is said to be beneficial for balanced intestinal transit, cardiovascular health and even mental health, as explained by the Manger Bouger portal, part of a French national public health programme.

But Harvard researchers are now going one step further.

In a study initially presented in July last year at the annual meeting of the American Society for Nutrition, but whose conclusions were published May 6 in the journal 'JAMA Network Open', they suggest that regular consumption of olive oil may be associated with a reduced risk of death from dementia.

This finding was established after analysing a wealth of data, including dietary questionnaires, involving 92,383 adults over 28 years. During this period, more than 4,700 participants died of dementia.

In detail, the results reveal that consuming more than half a tablespoon of olive oil per day is associated with a 28 per cent lower risk of dying from dementia.

The researchers also note that replacing one teaspoon of margarine and mayonnaise with an equivalent amount of olive oil per day is associated with an eight to 14 per cent reduction in the risk of dying from dementia, irrespective of the diet followed.

Despite this finding, the scientists point out that people who regularly consumed olive oil instead of processed or animal fats tended to have a healthier diet overall.

“Our study reinforces dietary guidelines recommending vegetable oils such as olive oil and suggests that these recommendations not only support heart health but potentially brain health, as well.

“Opting for olive oil, a natural product, instead of fats such as margarine and commercial mayonnaise, is a safe choice and may reduce the risk of fatal dementia,” says Anne-Julie Tessier, a postdoctoral fellow at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, quoted in a news release dating from July.

However, this is only an observational study, so there is no evidence to prove that olive oil is the cause of the reduced risk of fatal dementia.

But this is an important detail, and one which the researchers say would require additional studies, including randomised controlled trials, to confirm these effects and determine the optimal amount of olive oil to consume to reap the full benefits.

According to World Health Organisation data, more than 55 million people are living with dementia, with some 10 million new cases every year. Alzheimer’s disease is the most common form of dementia, accounting for 60 to 70 per cent of cases.