Mediterranean diet 'can significantly reduce risk of heart attack and stroke'

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PEOPLE in the UK who eat as if they live in the sunny south of France or Greece can significantly reduce their risk of a heart attack and stroke, research has shown.

The first study of its kind confirms the known benefits of a Mediterranean diet in Britons.

Scientists found that healthy people who adopted Mediterranean-type eating habits were up to 16 per cent less likely to suffer damage to their hearts or arteries than those who did not.

The findings indicate that 12.5 per cent of cardiovascular deaths in the UK could be avoided if more Britons switched to a Mediterranean diet.

Traditionally people from Mediterranean countries consume large amounts of fruit, vegetables, whole grains, nuts and olive oil, little red meat, and only moderate quantities of dairy products, fish, poultry and wine.

Lead researcher Dr Nita Forouhi, from the Medical Research Council Epidemiology Unit at Cambridge University, said: "The benefits of the Mediterranean diet for cardiovascular health are well documented in countries of the Mediterranean region, but this is the first study to evaluate this in the UK.

"If our findings are broadly representative of the overall UK population, then we can assume that higher level of adherence to the Mediterranean diet could have significant impact in lowering the cardiovascular disease burden in the UK."

Results from the study appear in the latest issue of the journal BMC Medicine.

The Cambridge team gathered data from 23,902 healthy Britons whose diets had been monitored for 12 to 17 years. Records were kept of new instances of cardiovascular disease and deaths.

The degree to which participants adhered to a Mediterranean diet was measured using a 15-point score based on guideline recommendations.

Dr Forouhi added: "Encouraging greater adoption of the Mediterranean diet looks like a promising component of a wider strategy to help prevent cardiovascular disease, including other important factors such as not smoking and maintaining a healthy weight, blood cholesterol and blood pressure."

Dr Louis Levy, head of nutrition science at Public HealthEngland, said: “The Mediterranean style diet in this study is in fact similar to official UK advice, as shown in the Eatwell Guide.

"We also recommend cutting back on sugary, fatty and salty food and drinks and being mindful of calories to help protect your heart and general health.”