Mediterranean diet could prevent 20,000 deaths in Britain each year

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Some 20,000 lives could be saved each year if Britons switched to a [Mediterranean diet](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/08/28/eating-a-mediterranean-diet-is-better-for-the-heart-than-taking/), according to a new [study](https://bmcmedicine.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12916-016-0677-4).

The Medical Research Council (MRC) and Cambridge University followed nearly 24,000 people in the UK for up to 17 years to see how their diet affected the health of their heart.

They discovered that people who followed a diet high in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts, fish and olive oil lowered their risk of cardiovascular disease by up to 16 per cent.

The researchers estimate that 12.5 per cent of cardiovascular deaths, such as heart attacks and strokes,  could be prevented if everyone switched to the Mediterranean diet. There are around 160,000 heart deaths each year so 20,000 deaths could be avoided just by eating more healthy foods.

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (Nice) already recommends a [Mediterranean diet](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/science/2016/07/22/live-like-an-italian-to-combat-major-health-problems-say-experts/) for people who had already suffered a heart attack or stroke, but this is the first evidence to show it can ward off illness for Britons.

“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,” said Dr Nita Forouhi, lead author from the MRC Epidemiology Unit at the University of Cambridge.

“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.”

Although the study is only observational, the authors say they adjusted for lifestyle and other factors which could have distorted the results, and say the results provide ‘robust evidence’ for a link.

 “Encouraging greater adoption of the Mediterranean diet looks like a promising component of a 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,” added Dr Forouhi.

Dr Ian Johnson, nutrition researcher and emeritus fellow at the Institute of Food Research, said: “This is a careful and rigorous study showing a relatively small but potentially important association between higher adherence to a Mediterranean style diet and reduced risk of incident heart disease, and death from heart disease.

"It is consistent with previous studies, and its importance lies in its application to a British population.

“A shift toward the Mediterranean diet seems to be a safe and prudent option to reduce the risk of heart disease in the UK.”

The research was published in the journal [BMC Medicine](https://bmcmedicine.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12916-016-0677-4).