

CONVIVIALITY AND COMMENSALITY: UNDERAPPRECIATED BENEFITS OF THE MEDITERRANEAN DIET



Among the often neglected features of the **Mediterranean diet** is the preparation and sharing of food. **Conviviality and commensality**, the practice of **eating together**, can mediate **health benefits**. [A new study](#) revealed the importance of conviviality in driving part of the health effects of the **Mediterranean lifestyle**. People eat every day, not just to meet our nutritional needs but also because the **social dimension of sharing meals** is a central part of human civilisation and food cultures

around the world. In particular, the Mediterranean diet, well known for [being sustainable](#) and having an optimal nutritional profile that increases longevity and [minimises morbidity](#), sees the preparation and sharing of food as intrinsic cornerstones.

A beneficial social phenomenon

The **Mediterranean diet** [has been positively related](#) to a **low prevalence of chronic degenerative diseases**, psychological well-being, and **lower levels of both anxiety and depression**. Among the features of the traditional Mediterranean model [is commensality](#), the act of eating and sharing food with other people at the same table, from a formal dinner party to a festive gathering to an ordinary family meal. [This fundamental social phenomenon](#) has remained a deeply rooted social practice across **the continuum of human evolution**, traced back to our primate predecessors who engaged in the sharing of sustenance, a key factor in enhancing **group success and security**. Conviviality and the pleasure derived from shared food experiences [play a role](#) in contributing to its **health benefits**, yet these are often overlooked features of the Mediterranean diet. The **release of neurochemicals**, such as oxytocin and endorphins, might explain such benefits.

[In a 2023 study](#), scientists report **a 29% lower risk of all-cause mortality and a 28% lower risk of cancer mortality** in those with high adherence to Mediterranean dietary habits. The category that was most closely linked to these reduced risks – as well as a **lower risk of cardiovascular disease mortality** – was “**physical activity, rest, social habits and conviviality**”. The Mediterranean diet is often praised for its ‘tastiness’, thanks to the use of local ingredients and [traditional recipes](#), in contrast to dietary advice in some countries where prevailing guidelines often revolve around rigid rules, a sense of deprivation, with minimal regard for aspects of taste, **culinary heritage**, shared meals or the simple [pleasure of eating](#). A higher adherence to the Mediterranean lifestyle [has been associated](#) with higher levels of happiness in adolescents, **a 30% reduced risk for depression and a 40% reduced risk for cognitive impairment**. Experimentally, sharing

meals can also be a productive [treatment strategy](#) for the management of depression, adding further experimental evidence of the [therapeutic actions](#) of the Mediterranean diet.

Conviviality has a significant impact on overall well-being

Conviviality and health are closely related concepts, as **social connections** and positive interactions with others can [have a significant impact](#) on overall well-being, building strong relationships, fostering a **sense of community**, and creating a **supportive environment** where individuals can thrive. Social context exerts a profound influence on **eating behaviour**. When in the company of others, our dietary choices and patterns diverge significantly from when we **dine in solitude**. For example, adults who eat alone [consume](#) fewer fruits and vegetables and more junk food than those who eat with others.

In addition, the **family is the most fundamental commensal unit**. Families that eat meals together tend to have healthier diets, and family members are [less likely to be overweight](#) or obese, having [better academic performance](#) in youths and **improved mental health outcomes**. [Mounting evidence](#) shows that the family environment is essential for developing positive eating behaviours in children and adolescents, as food conviviality can promote **healthy eating habits**. In fact, a lunch/dinner table is where social bonds are strengthened, [cultural exchange continues](#) and meeting others allows **intergenerational exchange**. These symbolic aspects are [particularly evident](#) in the rituals associated with festivals and community events, an opportunity to share a meal in an atmosphere of celebration, laughter, and conviviality.

The limits of fragmented and individualised eating patterns

In contrast, the **Western diet and lifestyle** are often characterised by **fragmented and individualised eating patterns**, with fast-paced eating habits and an overall low nutritional quality linked to a **decline in commensality and diminished conviviality**, contributing to [adverse health outcomes](#). [Epidemiological investigations](#) into the so-called **Blue Zones**, regions with exceptional longevity, reveal a common thread of robust commensality and conviviality. **People with strong social connections and a sense of community are healthier** than those who are socially isolated. **Social support** [has been linked](#) to a lower risk of depression, anxiety, and other mental health conditions, as well as a **lower risk of physical health problems such as heart disease, stroke, and diabetes**. Moreover, food conviviality can encourage people to try new and healthy foods, as sharing meals with others can **expose individuals to different cultural cuisines**, promoting a diverse and balanced diet.

Based on the available evidence, scientists suggest **public health initiatives and interventions aimed at directly increasing/improving people's social relationships and interactions**, networking, and sociability. As modern society is increasingly characterised by **social isolation and loneliness**, scientists recommend promoting sharing meals and conviviality to improve people's eating and living habits.

“Health is closely linked to a **healthy diet and adequate physical activity**, but nutrition and physical activity can do more, facilitating the creation of **social networks between people** who, in turn, can promote well-being – says **Elisabetta Bernardi**, nutritional biologist and main author of the study – When thinking about the Mediterranean diet

to explain its health benefits, it is necessary to also think about the **social aspects**, about eating together. Conviviality can benefit in many ways, including **reducing stress**, improving mood, improving nutrient intake, and **increasing happiness** and well-being. Therefore, conviviality and **positive experiences related to food** can also **lead to better dietary choices.**"

