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THE AVOCADO: A FOOD FOR THE MEDITERRANEAN DIET

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In the epidemiological studies being carried out by our group at the Bajo Guadalhorce area, it has been found that nearly 8% of the adult population eats avocados quite often (almost daily). In spite of the growing interest on avocado, studies on its biological value are scarce and, most of them, not well designed, although a considerable growth has been observed in the last few years. We have reviewed the literature, since the end of the sixties, and curiously, the first studies were directed to evaluate the toxicity of avocado in animals. Since the avocado paste includes latex derivatives, the allergies to some of its components has raised considerable interest. In the last few years, a better knowledge of avocado composition has opened two research lines where results are particularly relevant. One of them is about its potential effect on diseases related to collagen pathology, mainly osteoarthritic diseases, where some assays have shown a beneficial effect. The other line is derived from the special composition of avocado fat. The avocado is a fatty fruit, enriched in monoenoic acids and, in this sense, avocado is similar to olive. Our epidemiological studies, mentioned above, have shown that the population which eats often avocados, has higher levels of monoenoic acids, in the plasma phospholipids, than people who do not eat frequently avocados. This clearly shows, in vivo and under natural conditions, that the higher monounsaturated fatty acids (MUFA) content of avocado is finally incorporated to the biological structures of those who eat this fruit.

Based on these observations, several studies have been carried out on the effects of an avocado enriched diet in the lipid metabolism and a favorable effect in total cholesterol LDL and HDL as well as other factors has been found. This is not surprising since the positive effects of MUFA on blood pressure, resistance to insulin, aggregation and coagulation systems, the previously cited lipid metabolism or even the distribution of body fat, makes the monounsaturated fats, the most adequate for nutritional recommendations. Finally, in the above mentioned studies, we have been able to observe an epidemiological association between the frequent ingest of avocados and the thyroid function; these observations will require further experiments for validation.

The Mediterranean diet is a cultural, medical and economical construction being defined by: 1) diversity in consumption 2) use of the olive oil (the MUFA enriched fat, by excellence) 3) a determined proportions among carbohydrates/proteins/fats on the diet and 4) the most difficult to define, a determined way of life, especially in relation to food. In this context, the fruit discovered by the Spaniards when they traveled to the New World, could be another piece in this offer of nutritional diversity, which is the first property of the Mediterranean diet, as well as another source of additional MUFA. It can also contribute to an adequate proportion of nutrients and, very specially, to a way of understanding life, which is the last part of the Mediterranean diet. It should not be forgotten that diet and dietetics, from an ethimological point of view, precisely mean it, a determined way of life.