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Five healthy habits to bring home from your Mediterranean holiday

Don't want to let go of your summer break yet? Then hang on to these tips – they might hold the key to a longer life

By Eleanor Steafel

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If you were to take an inventory on the last day of your summer holiday, there might be a few areas in which you'd score highly. Namely, the number of ice creams consumed, Aperol spritzes sunk and breakfast pastries enjoyed – the best breaks, after all, are filled with the treats we often deny ourselves at home.

But even after a week of indulgence, we tend to feel so much healthier having spent a few days away. Why? Because in all likelihood, some healthy habits will have slipped into your holiday routine too – probably without you even having to try.

Alongside the treats, you are bound to have spent more time outside and less time staring into the blue light of your phone. You might have managed a daily afternoon nap (proven to be good for you), regular swims, and got your steps well above 10,000 just by walking to and from the beach.

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Sure, there might have been the odd plate of chips, but there were probably also plenty of salads made with seasonal vegetables, fresh fish, good quality olive oil and perfectly ripe fruit.

A new study suggested that bringing some of these habits home with us might even hold the key to a longer life. Adopting the healthy habits we picked up after a few days in the Mediterranean could reduce the chance of heart attacks, stroke and cancer.



With food variety comes improved gut bacteria

According to research by the Autonomous University of Madrid, which studied 110,000 Britons aged between 45 and 70 over a nine-year period, those who followed a Med lifestyle most closely were found to be 29 per cent less likely to die prematurely, with diet, the amount of rest, physical activity and vibrant social life all lauded as contributory factors.

Back in Britain, fitting a sea swim and an afternoon nap into your daily routine might be a pipe dream, but there are plenty of changes that could be surprisingly easy to make.

September is arguably a better time to make resolutions than January, so we asked some experts for the healthy habits they will be bringing back from holiday.

Eat slowly at a table as a family

Nutritionist Gabriela Peacock, who is reputed to have had a hand in the pre-wedding diets of both the Duke of Sussex and Princess Eugenie, said holidays are a great time to reset family mealtimes.

"I find mealtimes with my kids when I'm working a bit stressful. It's really nice to slow down on holiday," she said. "I absolutely don't allow any electronics at the table for the kids or for us. That's a really nice habit to bring back, just to enjoy the time together."



'Families who sit around the table tend to have healthier eating habits,' says Dr Frankie Phillips

There are digestive benefits too, as Peacock pointed out: "You are more conscious of what you eat which is a huge benefit because you end up not overeating. If you slow down, you chew properly, and if you chew properly you produce more digestive enzymes."

Eating together is particularly important, said Dr Frankie Phillips, a registered dietitian and expert in early years nutrition.

"Families who sit around the table tend to have healthier eating habits," she noted.

Increase your food variety

On holiday, our diets inevitably change, and our guts may thank us for keeping the variety going. Dr Phillips said: "The more foods you can incorporate into your diet, the more likely you are to improve your nutrient targets."

With variety comes improved gut bacteria, as she explained: "The recommendation is that you should be aiming for about 30 different plant foods in a week. Gut bacteria affects all kinds of things from immune function through to brain function and mental health and digestive health too."

A simple switch, such as adding more fresh herbs to your cooking or a grain you had on holiday that you wouldn't normally cook at home, could get you closer to 30.



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Practise mindful movement

Ringfenced time without your phone is rare these days – we tend to be plugged in even when exercising, using it for music, a fitness app or a YouTube yoga video. Swimming might be the one sport that requires you to leave your phone behind and focus.

"Any activity that you are fully present in can be a mindful activity," said Nick Scaramanga, a mindfulness teacher.

"[When swimming] you fully feel the resistance of the water, the temperature, the weightlessness of the body, the freedom that that might give you, perhaps any fear."

Even just 20 minutes of breaststrokes can help reduce stress by encouraging you to be more present in your body. It's important to find "anything that reduces your stress, and being in the moment, being aware", said Scaramanga.

"Stress has a biological impact on the cells in the body. That causes ageing and cardiovascular problems, apart from it just being unpleasant for most people to be stressed."

Find your nearest pool, then, and give yourself the gift of a regular phoneless swim.

Just get walking

Few of us feel inclined to work out on holiday. You might, however, find that your daily step count increases naturally, simply because you aren't spending the day tied to a desk.

"On holiday, I can't do what I normally do back home, where I like to do half an hour of weights and half an hour cardio [daily]," said Nick Finney, a personal trainer. "There's no equipment so I just keep up my activity. I swim, I play table tennis, I go for a walk."



A small amount of daily activity can do wonders for your fitness

It might not be as "intense" as a circuits class, he said, but just a small amount of daily activity can do wonders for your fitness - "It's a good lesson in keeping up the overall activity."

Walking is particularly effective for "burning pure fat," said Finney. So while that hike up the cliff from the beach might not feel as if it's burning lots of

calories, it's a handy burst of incidental exercise.

Stick to three meals a day

We are a nation of snackers and one of the biggest consumers of ultra-processed foods in the world, with cereals and snack bars among the worst culprits. Aside from a few crisps with an evening drink, holidays tend to be a time when we stick to three good meals a day and don't rely on snacks to give us energy in between.

Leaving more gaps in between eating is "good for your body," said Peacock, who advocates leaving a 16-hour window without food. The important thing is to "not eat all day long", she added.

"When you eat all day long you end up gaining weight. On holiday, I eat delicious food, I eat more carbs than I would probably in London, but it's in the eight-hour window.