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A school-based intervention to foster adherence to the Mediterranean diet in adolescents: the PROMEDLIFE project

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Populations in Mediterranean countries are increasingly adopting unhealthy diets and moving away from the Mediterranean Diet (MD). This shift contributes to increase non-communicable chronic diseases and environmental degradation. The PROMEDLIFE PRIMA project (<https://promedlifeproject.eu/>) aimed at tackling this negative trend through a multi-actor approach including school-based interventions in Italy, Greece and Tunisia. This study intends to assess a 4-week sensory education intervention to promote the use of the five senses during meals and/or nutrition education about nutrients, food groups, balanced meals and healthy and sustainable diets in a high school in Italy. Nutritional education was delivered as lecture-based lessons in class and through a web-app to families of students. A total 198 out of 201 enrolled adolescents completed the study (14-17 years, 65% males): 57 in the control group (C), 50 in the nutritional education intervention group (N), 37 in the sensory education intervention group (S), and 54 in the group with both sensory and nutritional interventions (NS). Adherence to the MD (KIDMED questionnaire), nutritional knowledge (NK questionnaire), sociodemographic and lifestyle data (HBSC questionnaire), picky eating (PEQ) and food neophobia scale (FNS) were collected at the beginning and at the end of the intervention to evaluate its effectiveness. Medium adherence to the MD was observed in all the intervention groups, both before and after the intervention. Significant increases of MD adherence after the intervention were only observed in the S group ($p = 0.007$), which showed the lowest KIDMED score at baseline. Conversely, statistical improvement was found in nutritional knowledge ($p < 0.001$) only in the N and NS groups. In conclusion, including nutritional lectures in the high school curriculum promotes knowledge acquisition about healthy and sustainable diet. However, a period longer than 4 weeks may be necessary to translate this knowledge into improved eating habits. The project is still ongoing, and follow-up data collection will be performed. Final analysis, including data on picky eating and food neophobia, as well as overall eating behavior at follow-up, will allow an evaluation of possible long-term changes.