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Investigating of the effects of Orthodox Christian fasting on human health

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Διερευνώντας τις επιδράσεις της ορθόδοξης
χριστιανικής νηστείας στην ανθρώπινη υγεία

Περίληψη στο τέλος του άρθρου

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Several studies about the effects of Orthodox Christian fasting (OF) on human health have published in the last 20 years,¹⁻⁷ but it is obvious that the potential long-term beneficial effects of this type of religious fasting on human health cannot be established through a small number of heterogeneous research studies conducted only during fasting periods. In this short report, we highlight the problems and obstacles that researchers would encounter in designing and conducting such studies, justifying their limited number in medical literature.

The first problem is the misinterpretation of the purpose of OF, viewing it as an individual-centered therapy that is almost exclusively for the health of the body, rather than Christ-centered, as it is intended. Such a message is incompatible with Orthodox Christian beliefs. Specifically, according to the Orthodox Christian Patristic Tradition, OF has two parallel aspects (its double character): the physical and the spiritual.⁸ The first, the physical fasting, implies abstinence from particular foods, such as dairy products, eggs and all kinds of meat, on specific days and for certain time periods. The second, the spiritual fasting, comprises abstinence from

evil thoughts, desires, and deeds. The purpose of OF is to gain mastery over oneself and to conquer the passions of the flesh. It is designed, precisely, to liberate oneself from dependence on the things of this world in order to focus on the things of the Kingdom of God, to purify the human body and soul from passions in order to approach God, the Holy Trinity, to unite with His uncreated energies and become a member of His grace.⁸ In the Orthodox Christian Patristic Tradition, what is important is not whether the Christian has a healthy body, but that he/she has a sanctified body. In addition, food abstinence does not mean a contempt for food, but an ascetic attempt to be released from receiving pleasure from it, which is considered to be a cause of sin.⁸ Ultimately, OF which is limited to food abstinence only, and is not integrated into the life of the Orthodox Church is not genuine OF, but useless tyolatry, without benefit for the whole psychosomatic human.⁸ Such simple food abstinence without the spiritual extensions could, however, be considered as a Mediterranean type of diet⁶ or as a special type of intermittent fasting⁹ with beneficial effects on physical health.

The second problem is the difficulty in assessing the degree to which the religious sentiment of those fasting contributes to the results of these studies. As is documented in the medical literature, there are possible favorable effects of religiosity/spirituality on several cardio-metabolic determinants, depression, stress and other variables.^{10,11} The third problem in these studies is the difficulty in achieving the same or a similar level of OF observance among the participants, concerning not only the kind of foods allowed, but also the quantity consumed, because religious fasting is a voluntary resolution and a personal battle. In addition, the food consumed during non-fasting periods may vary both quantitatively and qualitatively, which could affect the results of the studies to investigate the long-term results of the Orthodox Christian diet generally, part of which is the OF. It should be noted that Orthodox Christian diet rules can differ between lay people, priests, nuns and monks, during both fasting and non-fasting periods, as for example the rules for meat consumption.⁷

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We know that the impact of the Orthodox Christian Church on the dietary behavior of Greeks is strong.¹² Greek Orthodox Christians are distinguished for their deep religious sentiments, even if they do not observe the dietary rules strictly during fasting periods. Promotion of the dietary rules of the Orthodox Christian Church could be an effective health strategy in an obese/overweight population such as observed in contemporary Greece. Religiously devout individuals, well equipped with this kind of nutritional recommendations, would be able to satisfy their physical and spiritual needs at the same time. We point out that the observance of Orthodox Christian Church dietary fasting rules can help, for example, patients with metabolic syndrome (MetS) and or non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD). They can be encouraged to perceive OF as part of a program of weight loss and lifestyle modification (the cornerstone therapy of both MetS and NAFLD), characterized by self-discipline in eating, in terms of the quantity and variety of food, and eating habits ("OF with moderation"), and not only as a deprivation of particular foods on specific days and time periods. Otherwise, they may resort to excessive consumption of the allowed foods (e.g., carbohydrates), which may result in positive energy balance and, consequently, in further weight gain. This explains why, even though many Orthodox Christian fast observers (both lay and clergy) may have fasted for several years, they are overweight or obese. We consider it essential to note that OF was established by the Orthodox Christian Church in order to serve the following golden rules: "Give the body what its needs demand and not what desire wants" and "we don't live to eat but eat to live".

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Διερευνώντας τις επιδράσεις της ορθόδοξης χριστιανικής νηστείας στην ανθρώπινη υγεία

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Την τελευταία εικοσαετία, αρκετές μελέτες που αφορούν στην επίδραση της ορθόδοξης χριστιανικής νηστείας στην ανθρώπινη υγεία έχουν δημοσιευτεί. Πρόκειται για ετερογενείς ερευνητικές μελέτες που έχουν διεξαχθεί κατά τη διάρκεια συγκεκριμένων χρονικών περιόδων νηστείας και κατά συνέπεια δεν μπορούν να εκτιμήσουν με ασφάλεια τις μακροπρόθεσμες, μάλλον ευεργετικές, επιδράσεις της θρησκευτικής αυτής νηστείας στην ανθρώπινη ψυχοσωματική υγεία. Στην παρούσα εργασία επισημαίνονται τα προβλήμα-

τα και τα εμπόδια που αντιμετωπίζει ένας ερευνητής κατά τον σχεδιασμό ή τη διεξαγωγή τέτοιων μελετών, τα οποία και δικαιολογούν τον περιορισμένο σχετικά αριθμό τους στην ιατρική βιβλιογραφία.

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Λέξεις ευρητηρίου: Εμπόδια, Ορθόδοξη νηστεία, Προβλήματα, Υγεία

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