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Mediterranean diet: Choose this heart-healthy diet option

By Mayo Clinic staff

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Mediterranean diet: Choose this heart-healthy diet option

The Mediterranean diet is a heart-healthy eating plan combining elements of Mediterranean-style cooking. Here's how to adopt the Mediterranean diet.

By Mayo Clinic staff

If you're looking for a heart-healthy eating plan, the Mediterranean diet might be right for you. The Mediterranean diet incorporates the basics of healthy eating — plus a splash of flavorful olive oil and perhaps a glass of red wine — among other components characterizing the traditional cooking style of countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea.

Most healthy diets include fruits, vegetables, fish and whole grains, and limit unhealthy fats. While these parts of a healthy diet remain tried-and-true, subtle variations or differences in proportions of certain foods may make a difference in your risk of heart disease.

Benefits of the Mediterranean diet

Research has shown that the traditional Mediterranean diet reduces the risk of heart disease. In fact, a recent analysis of more than 1.5 million healthy adults demonstrated that following a Mediterranean diet was associated with a reduced risk of overall and cardiovascular mortality, a reduced incidence of cancer and cancer mortality, and a reduced incidence of Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases.

For this reason, most if not all major scientific organizations encourage healthy adults to adapt a style of eating like that of the Mediterranean diet for prevention of major chronic diseases.



Key components of the Mediterranean diet

The Mediterranean diet emphasizes:

- Getting plenty of exercise

- Eating primarily plant-based foods, such as fruits and vegetables, whole grains, legumes and nuts
- Replacing butter with healthy fats such as olive oil and canola oil
- Using herbs and spices instead of salt to flavor foods
- Limiting red meat to no more than a few times a month
- Eating fish and poultry at least twice a week
- Drinking red wine in moderation (optional)

The diet also recognizes the importance of enjoying meals with family and friends.

Fruits, vegetables, nuts and grains

The Mediterranean diet traditionally includes fruits, vegetables, pasta and rice. For example, residents of Greece eat very little red meat and average nine servings a day of antioxidant-rich fruits and vegetables. The Mediterranean diet has been associated with a lower level of oxidized low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol — the "bad" cholesterol that's more likely to build up deposits in your arteries.

Nuts are another part of a healthy Mediterranean diet. Nuts are high in fat (approximately 80 percent of their calories come from fat), but most of the fat is not saturated. Because nuts are high in calories, they should not be eaten in large amounts — generally no more than a handful a day. For the best nutrition, avoid candied or honey-roasted and heavily salted nuts.

Grains in the Mediterranean region are typically whole grain and usually contain very few unhealthy trans fats, and bread is an important part of the diet there. However, throughout the Mediterranean region, bread is eaten plain or dipped in olive oil — not eaten with butter or margarines, which contain saturated or trans fats.

Healthy fats

The focus of the Mediterranean diet isn't on limiting total fat consumption, but rather to make wise choices about the types of fat you eat. The Mediterranean diet discourages saturated fats and hydrogenated oils (trans fats), both of which contribute to heart disease.

The Mediterranean diet features olive oil as the primary source of fat. Olive oil provides monounsaturated fat — a type of fat that can help reduce LDL cholesterol levels when used in place of saturated or trans fats. "Extra-virgin" and "virgin" olive oils — the least processed forms — also contain the highest levels of the protective plant compounds that provide antioxidant effects.

Monounsaturated fats and polyunsaturated fats, such as canola oil and some nuts, contain the beneficial linolenic acid (a type of omega-3 fatty acid). Omega-3 fatty acids lower triglycerides, decrease blood clotting, are associated with decreased sudden

heart attack, improve the health of your blood vessels, and help moderate blood pressure. Fatty fish — such as mackerel, lake trout, herring, sardines, albacore tuna and salmon — are rich sources of omega-3 fatty acids. Fish is eaten on a regular basis in the Mediterranean diet.

Wine

The health effects of alcohol have been debated for many years, and some doctors are reluctant to encourage alcohol consumption because of the health consequences of excessive drinking. However, alcohol — in moderation — has been associated with a reduced risk of heart disease in some research studies.

The Mediterranean diet typically includes a moderate amount of wine. This means no more than 5 ounces (148 milliliters) of wine daily for women (or men over age 65), and no more than 10 ounces (296 milliliters) of wine daily for men under age 65. More than this may increase the risk of health problems, including increased risk of certain types of cancer.

If you're unable to limit your alcohol intake to the amounts defined above, if you have a personal or family history of alcohol abuse, or if you have heart or liver disease, refrain from drinking wine or any other alcohol. Also keep in mind that red wine may trigger migraines in some people.

Putting it all together

The Mediterranean diet is a delicious and healthy way to eat. Many people who switch to this style of eating say they'll never eat any other way. Here are some specific steps to get you started:

- **Eat your veggies and fruits — and switch to whole grains.** An abundance and variety of plant foods should make up the majority of your meals. They should be minimally processed, and try to purchase them when they're in season. Strive for seven to 10 servings a day of veggies and fruits. Switch to whole-grain bread and cereal, and begin to eat more whole-grain rice and pasta products. Keep baby carrots, apples and bananas on hand for quick, satisfying snacks. Fruit salads are a wonderful way to eat a variety of healthy fruit.
- **Go nuts.** Keep almonds, cashews, pistachios and walnuts on hand for a quick snack. Choose natural peanut butter, rather than the kind with hydrogenated fat added. Try tahini (blended sesame seeds) as a dip or spread for bread.
- **Pass on the butter.** Try olive or canola oil as a healthy replacement for butter or margarine. Use it in cooking. After cooking pasta, add a touch of olive oil, some garlic and green onions for flavoring. Dip bread in flavored olive oil or lightly spread it on whole-grain bread for a tasty alternative to butter. Try tahini (blended sesame seeds) as a dip or spread for bread too.

- **Spice it up.** Herbs and spices make food tasty and are also rich in health-promoting substances. Season your meals with herbs and spices rather than salt.
- **Go fish.** Eat fish once or twice a week. Fresh or water-packed tuna, salmon, trout, mackerel and herring are healthy choices. Grilled fish tastes good and requires little cleanup. Avoid fried fish, unless it's sauteed in a small amount of canola oil.
- **Rein in the red meat.** Substitute fish and poultry for red meat. When eaten, make sure it's lean and keep portions small (about the size of a deck of cards). Also avoid sausage, bacon and other high-fat meats.
- **Choose low-fat dairy.** Limit higher fat dairy products such as whole or 2 percent milk, cheese and ice cream. Switch to skim milk, fat-free yogurt and low-fat cheese.
- **Raise a glass to healthy eating.** If it's OK with your doctor, have a glass of wine at dinner. If you don't drink alcohol, you don't need to start. Drinking purple grape juice may be an alternative to wine.

References

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