

# Eating the Mediterranean way

The Mediterranean diet provides a flexible blueprint for healthy eating. It is simple to follow, full of delicious food, and the health benefits speak for themselves—specifically in regard to heart health.



## What is the Mediterranean diet?

The Mediterranean diet is based on the food choices and cooking style of countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea, many of which boast high life expectancies.<sup>1</sup>

The Mediterranean diet began rising in popularity when researchers noticed that these countries' rates of chronic disease were among the lowest in the world and their life expectancy was among the highest. Now, the Mediterranean diet is a popular eating pattern that offers flexibility and loose guidelines with lots of potential health benefits.

## Potential benefits of the Mediterranean diet

Consistently eating Mediterranean-style foods may have many health benefits.<sup>2</sup>

Research indicates that following the Mediterranean diet may help:

- Improve sleep quality and quantity<sup>3</sup>
- Reduce inflammation to help fight diseases and decrease risk for cancer<sup>4</sup>
- Increase longevity<sup>5</sup>
- Improve brain and heart health<sup>6, 7</sup>
- Support healthy vision<sup>8</sup>
- Boost mental health<sup>9</sup>

**Bottom line:** The Mediterranean diet has some convincing health benefits. Let's take a look at how these foods benefit heart health, specifically.

## Tips for getting started

One of the biggest advantages of the Mediterranean diet is the flexibility it offers. There is no special book or eating plan to purchase—it is just a matter of learning about the foods that it includes and finding ways to incorporate them into your diet.

### 1 Eat lots of fruits and vegetables

A diet rich in fruits and vegetables may help reduce the risk of heart disease, including heart attack and stroke.<sup>10</sup> You should aim for three servings of vegetables and three servings of fruits per day on the Mediterranean diet;<sup>11</sup> however, research shows 10 servings may help even more.<sup>12</sup>

**Note:** One serving of vegetables is equal to a half cup of cooked vegetables or one cup of raw vegetables, and one serving of fruit is equal to a half to one cup.

No single fruit or vegetable provides all the nutrients you need to be healthy; this means variety is as important as quantity. Fruits and vegetables that seem to offer the greatest benefits include:<sup>12</sup>

- **Green, leafy vegetables**
- **Cruciferous vegetables**
- **Green and yellow vegetables**
- **Apples**
- **Pears**
- **Oranges and other citrus fruits**

### 2 Choose whole grains instead of refined grains

Whole grains are loaded with nutrients, including heart-healthy fiber. Dietary fiber from whole grains, as part of an overall healthy diet, may help improve blood cholesterol levels and lower the risk of heart disease, stroke, obesity, and Type 2 diabetes.<sup>13</sup>

Aim for 3–6 servings of whole grains per day on the Mediterranean diet.<sup>11</sup> One serving of whole grains is equal to a half cup of cooked oats, rice or pasta, one slice of bread, or one ounce of dry cereal.

The best way to identify a product as being whole grain is to look at the list of ingredients on the package. Many whole-grain products will list the words “whole” or “whole grain” as the first ingredient on the list.

Examples of whole grains include:

- **Whole-wheat bread**
- **Brown and wild rice**
- **Whole rye**
- **Oats and oatmeal**
- **Whole-grain barley**

#### Notes

### 3

## Use olive oil for cooking

Olive oil contains heart-healthy MUFAs, or monounsaturated fats. It may help reduce “bad” LDL cholesterol and improve how well “good” HDL cholesterol works.<sup>14</sup>

Aim for one tablespoon per day, but no more than four tablespoons per day (including your cooking oil) on the Mediterranean diet. Extra virgin and virgin olive oils are the least processed forms of olive oil—plus, they contain the highest level of compounds that provide antioxidant effects.

You can use olive oil in a variety of ways:

- **Cook fruits and vegetables in extra virgin olive oil.** Healthy fats can even make the vitamins in orange, yellow and red vegetables easier to absorb.
- **Use it in place of butter and margarine.** Drizzle vegetables with olive oil, add it to a sandwich or dip bread into it.
- **Make a salad dressing.** Use three parts oil to one part vinegar and add some salt, pepper and dijon mustard or garlic.

### 4

## Rethink meat

The Mediterranean diet uses red meat sparingly, focusing on poultry and other sources of protein instead. Red meat is high in saturated fat, which can be harmful to the blood vessels.<sup>15</sup>

Aim for no more than one 3-ounce serving of red meat per week on the Mediterranean diet.<sup>11</sup> When and if you do eat red meat, keep the meat lean and the portions small. One portion of meat is about the size of a deck of cards.

Instead of red meat, focus on **poultry, seafood, and legumes**. Chicken and turkey have less saturated fats than most red meat. Aim for three 3-ounce servings of poultry per week.<sup>11</sup>

When buying poultry, look for lean cuts. The leanest poultry is white meat from the breast with no skin. The preparation method you use to cook your poultry is important, too. Avoid frying; instead, opt to bake, broil, or grill.

### 5

## Substitute seafood

Fatty fish is rich in omega-3 fatty acids, which may help protect the heart by reducing inflammation throughout the body. Inflammation can damage blood vessels and lead to heart disease and stroke.<sup>16</sup>

Fatty fish like **salmon, lake trout, mackerel, herring, sardines, and tuna** contain the most omega-3 fatty acids, but many types of seafood contain small amounts of omega-3s.

Aim for at least two servings of omega-3-rich fish a week. One serving of fish is equal to about 3.5 ounces or about the size of a deck of cards.

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Switch to legumes

Legumes are high in protein and fiber, but low in fat, making them an excellent substitute for meat. Plus, they’re loaded with vitamins and minerals like folate, iron, phosphorus, potassium, and fiber. The legume family includes **beans**, **lentils**, and **peas**. Eating legumes as part of a healthy diet and lifestyle may help improve blood cholesterol, which is the leading cause of heart disease.<sup>17</sup>

Be sure to drain canned beans and rinse them with water to remove the excess salt or buy canned beans with no salt added. You can also make your own salt-free beans from scratch.

Consider adding legumes to your diet with the following ideas:

- Have beans and rice, an everyday dish in many of the world’s cuisines.
- Put beans into a whole-grain tortilla or pita bread.
- Add legumes to soups, salads, and pasta dishes.
- Toss them into sauteed vegetables or mix them with cooked leafy greens and garlic.
- Make homemade hummus or bean dip to use as a sandwich spread or dip for whole-grain crackers or vegetable sticks.

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Nosh on nuts

Nuts are rich in heart-healthy nutrients, including an amino acid called arginine, which helps relax blood vessels and ease blood flow.<sup>19</sup> Research shows that eating nuts may help reduce the risk of heart disease.<sup>19</sup>

Nuts come in a wide variety: **Almonds**, **hazelnuts**, **peanuts**, **pecans**, **pistachios**, and **walnuts** are among the healthiest options. Walnuts are especially high in omega-3 fatty acids, giving them some of the same benefits as fatty fish. A serving of nuts is a small handful, or 1.5 ounces, or two tablespoons of nut butter.

In addition to eating nuts as a snack, you can toss them in salads, stir-fries, breads, and yogurt. You can also use nut butters as a dip for fruits and vegetables, as a sandwich spread, or in a smoothie.

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## Watch out for sodium

Too much sodium may make your heart work harder and damage arteries. Over time, it can lead to heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, and congestive heart failure.<sup>20</sup>

Use these tips to help reduce sodium:

- **Avoid processed food.** Most sodium consumed in the American diet comes from processed foods.<sup>21</sup> The Mediterranean diet primarily emphasizes whole foods rather than processed ones.
- **Don't add salt at the table.** Avoid sprinkling salt on your food, especially before you've tasted it.
- **Use other ways to season food.** Herbs and spices can be used in place of salt in many dishes. Try the recommendations in the chart below.<sup>22</sup>

Herb or spice	Use it in...
Anise	Breads, snacks, soups, stews, vegetables, meats, and poultry
Annato seeds	Vegetables, meats, poultry, and rice
Basil	Soups, salads, vegetables, meats, and fish
Bay leaf	Soups, stews, meats, poultry, seafood, and sauces
Chili powder	Soups, salads, vegetables, and fish
Cilantro	Stews, meats, sauces, and rice
Cinnamon	Breads, snacks, salads, and vegetables
Clove	Breads, snacks, soups, salads, and vegetables
Dill weed	Soups, salads, vegetables, and fish
Garlic	Soups, stews, salads, vegetables, meats, poultry, seafood, and sauces
Ginger	Soups, salads, vegetables, meats, and seafood
Onion powder	Soups, salads, meats, poultry, and seafood
Lemongrass	Soups, stews, meats, poultry, seafood, and sauces
Marjoram	Soups, salads, vegetables, meats, poultry, and seafood
Nutmeg	Breads, snacks, vegetables, and meats
Oregano	Soups, salads, vegetables, meats, and poultry
Parsley	Salads, vegetables, meats, poultry, and seafood
Rosemary	Salads, vegetables, meats, and seafood
Saffron	Breads, snacks, soups, stews, poultry, seafood, sauces, and rice

Herb or spice	Use it in...
Sage	Soups, salads, vegetables, meats, and poultry
Tamarind	Soups, poultry, sauces, and rice
Thyme	Salads, vegetables, poultry, and fish
Vinegar	Soups, salads, vegetables, meats, and poultry

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## Know how to hydrate

Staying well hydrated is important to your heart health because it helps the heart more easily pump blood through the blood vessels.<sup>23</sup> Research shows that mild dehydration may impair vascular function (how well your blood vessels work) nearly as much as smoking a cigarette.<sup>24</sup>

The amount of water a person needs depends on many different factors. Pay attention to the color of your urine: Pale and clear means you’re well hydrated, but if it’s dark, you may need to drink more fluids.<sup>23</sup>

**Note:** Some vitamins and supplements may alter the color of your urine. Talk to your healthcare provider to learn more.

Wine is often consumed in moderate amounts on the Mediterranean diet, usually with meals. Wine intake is typically about two 3.5-ounce servings for men and one 3.5-ounce serving for women.<sup>11</sup> Red wine contains an antioxidant called resveratrol that may help prevent damage to blood vessels and lower LDL cholesterol.<sup>25</sup> For nondrinkers, it is not recommended that you start drinking for the heart health benefits.<sup>25</sup> Talk to your healthcare provider to find out if it is okay for you to drink wine.



**Need help reaching your goals?** Scan the QR code with a mobile phone or type in **HumanaNeighborhoodCenter.com** in a browser for additional resources and to schedule an appointment with a health educator.

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