

What is the Mediterranean diet?

The Mediterranean diet is a way of eating rather than a formal diet plan. It features foods eaten in Greece, Spain, southern Italy and France, and other countries that border the Mediterranean Sea. The Mediterranean diet emphasizes eating foods like fish, fruits, vegetables, beans, high-fiber breads and whole grains, and olive oil. Meat, cheese, and sweets are very limited. The recommended foods are rich with monounsaturated fats, fiber, and omega-3 fatty acids.

The Mediterranean diet is like other heart-healthy diets in that it recommends eating plenty of fruits, vegetables, and high-fiber grains. But in the Mediterranean diet, an average of 35% to 40% of calories can come from fat. Most other heart-healthy guidelines recommend getting less than 35% of your calories from fat. The fats allowed in the Mediterranean diet are mainly from unsaturated oils, such as fish oils, olive oil, and certain nut or seed oils (such as canola, soybean, or flaxseed oil). These types of oils may have a protective effect on the heart.

What are the benefits?

A Mediterranean-style diet may help lower your risk for certain diseases, improve your mood, and boost your energy levels. It may also help keep your heart and brain healthy. The benefits of a Mediterranean-style diet reinforce the benefits of eating a diet rich in fruits, vegetables, fish, high-fiber breads, whole grains, and healthy fats.

For your heart and body, a Mediterranean-style diet may:

- Prevent heart disease.
- Lower the risk of a second heart attack.
- Lower cholesterol.
- Prevent type 2 diabetes.
- Prevent metabolic syndrome.

For your brain, a Mediterranean-style diet might help prevent:

- Alzheimer's disease and other dementia.
- Depression.
- Parkinson's disease.

How can you make the Mediterranean diet part of your eating plan?

There are some simple things you can do to eat more of the healthy foods that make up the Mediterranean diet. A dietitian can help you make these and other changes to your diet. You can find information about the Mediterranean diet, recipes, and sample menus online and in cookbooks or videos. First, check out what's on the menu. Then see what Mediterranean-type foods you can add to your eating plan.

On the menu

The traditional Mediterranean diet calls for:

- **Eating a variety of fruits and vegetables** each day, such as grapes, blueberries, tomatoes, broccoli, peppers, figs, olives, spinach, eggplant, beans, lentils and chickpeas.
- **Eating a variety of whole-grain foods** each day, such as oats, brown rice, and whole wheat bread, pasta and couscous.

- **Choosing healthy (unsaturated) fats**, such as olive oil and certain nut or seed oils like canola, soybean and flaxseed. About 35% to 40% of daily calories can come from fat, mainly from unsaturated fats.
- **Limiting unhealthy (saturated) fats**, such as butter, palm oil, and coconut oil. And limit fats found in animal products, such as meat and dairy products made with whole milk.
- **Eating mostly vegetarian meals** that include whole grains, beans, lentils, and vegetables.
- **Eating fish** at least 2 times a week, such as tuna, salmon, mackerel, lake trout or sardines.
- **Eating moderate amounts of low-fat dairy products** each day or weekly, such as milk, cheese or yogurt.
- **Eating moderate amounts of poultry and eggs** every 2 days or weekly.
- **Limiting red meat** to only a few times a month in very small amounts. For example, a serving of meat is 3 ounces. This is about the size of a deck of cards.
- **Limiting sweets and desserts** to only a few times a week. This includes sugar-sweetened drinks like soda.
- The Mediterranean diet may also include **red wine** with your meal—1 glass each day for women and up to 2 glasses a day for men.

Tips for changing your diet

Here are some things you can do to switch from a traditional Western-style diet to a more Mediterranean way of eating.

- Dip bread in a mix of olive oil and fresh herbs instead of using butter.
- Add avocado slices to your sandwich instead of bacon.
- Have fish for lunch or dinner instead of red meat. Brush it with olive oil, and broil or grill it.
- Sprinkle your salad with seeds or nuts instead of cheese.
- Cook with olive or canola oil instead of butter or oils that are high in saturated fat.
- Choose whole-grain bread, pasta, rice and flour instead of foods made with white flour.
- Add ground flaxseed to cereal, low-fat yogurt and soups.
- Cut back on meat in meals. Instead of having pasta with meat sauce, try pasta tossed with olive oil and topped with pine nuts and a sprinkle of Parmesan cheese.
- Switch from 2% milk or whole milk to 1% or fat-free milk.
- Dip raw vegetables in a vinaigrette dressing or hummus instead of dips made from mayonnaise or sour cream.
- Have a piece of fruit for dessert instead of a piece of cake. Try baked apples or dried fruit.
- Use herbs and spices instead of salt to add flavor to foods.

Staying active

The Mediterranean diet isn't just about eating healthy foods. It's also about being active. So try to get at least 2½ hours of moderate aerobic activity a week. It's fine to do blocks of 10 minutes or more throughout your day and week. Choose exercises that make your heart beat faster and make you breathe harder. For example, go for a swim or a brisk walk or bike ride. You can also get some aerobic activity in your daily routine. Vacuuming, housework, gardening, and yard work can all be aerobic.