

Master the Facts about the Mediterranean Diet

What is the Mediterranean Diet?

Though not new, the Mediterranean-style diet has continued to make waves over the years. For the third year in a row, U.S. News & World Report has listed the Mediterranean diet as their “No. 1 Best Diet Overall.” It is also included in the 2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans as a healthy eating pattern for wellbeing and to prevent the risk of chronic disease. But what makes this eating pattern unique? A key point of the Mediterranean diet is there is no single “diet.” The phrase “Mediterranean diet” is a



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broad term that refers to dietary patterns often seen in countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea. Instead of a strict set of rules, there is a focus on including

plant-based foods such as whole grains, fruits, vegetables, beans, and unsaturated fats (such as nuts, seeds, and olive oil) throughout your day. Herbs and spices add flavor to liven up meals. Dairy, eggs, lean meat, and seafood are eaten in moderation. The diet limits red meat, added sugar, saturated fat, and highly processed foods. Let’s take a closer look at the main foods that make up a Mediterranean-style diet!

Choose: Fruits and Vegetables

Fruits and vegetables are a major part of the Mediterranean diet. Fruits and vegetables provide vitamins and minerals our bodies need for good health. They also contain fiber, which helps keep us feeling full and promotes regular bowel movements. In addition to these functions, a specific kind of fiber called “soluble fiber” also helps lower low-density

lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol levels. LDL cholesterol is known as “bad” cholesterol because when levels are too high, it contributes to fat deposits in the blood vessels, which increases the risk of heart disease and stroke. Soluble fiber helps bind to cholesterol, so you absorb less of it. Examples of fruits and vegetables higher in soluble fiber are oranges, Brussels sprouts, and asparagus. Beans and oats are also sources of soluble fiber. The other form of fiber found in fruits, vegetables, beans, and whole grains is called “insoluble fiber,” which helps keeps bowel movements regular. In addition to their nutritional value, fruits and vegetables brighten up our plates with colors and textures. This variety is important, so pick rich reds, bright oranges, dark greens, and deep blues to include a rainbow of produce in your diet! As summer begins, it is a great time to include more fruits and vegetables into your day. Add orange slices and pomegranate seeds onto a salad for a burst of flavor, toss tomatoes and cucumber with basil and olive oil for a refreshing side dish, or grill colorful vegetable kebabs.

Choose: Fish, Lean Protein, and Beans

In the Mediterranean diet, fish and seafood are encouraged about two times per week. Fatty fish like tuna and salmon provide heart healthy unsaturated fat via omega-3 fatty acids. Eggs, lean poultry, and low-fat dairy are also encouraged in moderation during the week. Red meat is not eliminated but is consumed less often – such as a few times per month. Legumes, which include beans, peas, and lentils, are another staple in the Mediterranean diet. They are a plant-based protein source that is low in saturated fat (the type of fat that raises your LDL cholesterol) and is a good source of both soluble and insoluble fiber. They also provide vitamins and minerals such as iron, magnesium, and potassium. Interested but

unsure how to add more legumes to your diet? Try dipping vegetables like carrots, peppers, or celery into hummus for a snack. Or, add beans into soups or salads. Lentils can be used as a substitute for ground meat in recipes like tacos or pasta sauce. Experiment with recipes and you may find a new favorite!

Choose: Whole Grains

What is a whole grain versus a refined grain? A whole grain is made up of three parts: the bran, germ, and endosperm. To process whole grains into refined grains, the bran and germ are removed, leaving the starchy endosperm behind. However, the bran and germ contain nutrients such as fiber, iron, and B vitamins. Therefore, whole grains naturally contain more of these nutrients than refined grains. How can you add more whole grains into your day? Pick whole wheat pasta (or mix half and half with regular pasta), choose whole wheat bread, and pick brown rice instead of white rice. Feeling more adventurous? Try whole grains you may not have heard of before, such as quinoa, farro, barley, or bulgur!

Choose: Unsaturated Fats Over Saturated Fats

Fat is part of a balanced diet, but certain types of fat are healthier than others. What's the difference?

- Saturated fat intake is associated with higher LDL cholesterol levels, which increases the risk of heart disease and stroke. Saturated fats are found mostly in animal products, such as meat (think marbled steaks or chicken skin), high fat dairy products, palm and coconut oils, and butter. Saturated fats should be limited.
- Trans fats (or hydrogenated oils) also increase LDL cholesterol levels. Trans fats are found in processed baked goods or snack foods and in stick margarine. Try to avoid trans fats.
- Unsaturated fats, when eaten instead of saturated fats, can help lower LDL cholesterol levels and may reduce risk of heart disease. Unsaturated fats are found in fatty fish like salmon, nuts/seeds, and plant oils such as olive or canola oil. Omega-3 fatty acids are a type of unsaturated fat found in foods such as salmon and tuna, walnuts, and ground flax seed. Intake



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of omega-3 fatty acids may lower triglyceride levels, which is also helpful for heart health.

Foods rich in unsaturated such as nuts, seeds, fish, and olive oil are plentiful within the Mediterranean eating style. To incorporate sources of unsaturated fat into your diet, try cooking with olive oil instead of butter, add chopped nuts into salads, or pair avocado with whole wheat toast. Remember that fat is still high in calories, so portion size is important.

Choose: Herbs and Spices

The Mediterranean diet utilizes herbs and spices to flavor foods, rather than excess salt intake. Experiment with basil, garlic, pepper, parsley, oregano, or other herbs and spices that appeal to you to add extra flavor to your dishes.

Limit: Added Sugar and Refined Foods

Sweets and drinks with added sugars are limited in the Mediterranean diet. Highly refined processed foods are also eaten less frequently, such as white rice and white pasta.

What's the Bottom Line?

The Mediterranean-style diet is more of an eating pattern than a strict diet. It does not focus on eliminating food groups. Instead, it emphasizes plant-based foods such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts, seeds, and legumes, with moderate intake of fish, chicken, dairy, and healthy fats. It is a flexible eating pattern and can be tailored to an individual's tastes, budget, and lifestyle.

References:

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Need a Dietitian?

Registered Dietitians are here to help you with your nutrition questions. To make an appointment call: 412-692-4497 (Oakland location) or 412-623-2421 (Shadyside location).