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Mediterranean diet blends healthy foods, lifestyle



Take naps, set aside time to be more social, drink wine — all while lowering your risk for numerous chronic diseases and cancer.

What's this enticing program?

It's the Mediterranean diet. But it's more than a diet — it's a model eating plan for good health.

U.S. News & World Report ranks the Mediterranean diet the No. 1 best diet overall, the No. 1 plant-based diet and the No. 1 diet for healthy eating. The Mediterranean diet ties for the best heart-healthy diet.

The Mediterranean diet became popular in the 1960s after researchers compared various diets of people living in southern Italy, Greece, northern Europe and the U.S. People in Mediterranean countries were found to have a lower risk of heart disease. Further study has found the Mediterranean diet to be a good eating plan for promoting weight loss and reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease, stroke, diabetes, cancer, and Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases.

Built around plant-based foods, the Mediterranean diet provides a wide range of nutrients that promote overall health, including:

- Flavonols and anthocyanins, which reduce heart-disease risk
- Carotenes and other types of antioxidants that may reduce inflammation
- Monounsaturated fat, which has been found to lower total cholesterol and low-density lipoprotein, also known as LDL or "bad" cholesterol levels

Change up what you eat

- **Aim for seven to 10 servings per day of fruit and vegetables.**
Expand your fruit and veggie horizon with pomegranates, figs, grapes, peaches, nectarines, cantaloupe, spinach, kale, Swiss chard, and collard and mustard greens. Wander through a farmers market for local choices.
- **Opt for whole grains.**
Switch to whole-grain bread, cereal and pasta. Experiment with whole grains, such as bulgur and farro.
- **Add in nuts and seeds.**
These foods are high in fiber, protein and healthy fats.
- **Use healthy fats.**
Try olive oil instead of butter when cooking. Rather than putting butter or margarine on bread, try dipping it in flavored olive oil.
- **Eat fish twice a week.**
Fresh or water-packed tuna, salmon, trout, mackerel and herring, along with seafood like shrimp, crab and mussels, are healthy choices. Grilled fish and seafood taste good and require little cleanup. Avoid deep-fried fish.
- **Reduce red meat.**
Substitute fish, poultry or beans for meat. If you eat meat, make sure it's lean and keep portions small, usually about 3 ounces of cooked meat.
- **Enjoy some dairy.**
Eat low-fat Greek or plain yogurt and a variety of cheeses. Try cheeses made from goat or sheep milk, like chevre and feta.
- **Spice it up.**
Herbs and spices boost flavor and lessen the need for salt.
- **Sip wine, but in moderation.**
In moderate amounts, alcohol can reduce the risk of heart disease. Typically, red wine — rather than white — is a Mediterranean choice. Limit your intake to one glass per day and drink it with a meal. Keep in mind, wine is optional.

Download the Mediterranean Diet Pyramid: Guidelines for Adults.

Modify your lifestyle

While much of the Mediterranean diet revolves around healthy eating, a large part includes slowing down and enjoying life — something most of us can benefit from for our well-being and mental health.

The basics of Mediterranean-style eating include:

- Sitting down at a table for at least two lunches or dinners per week.
- Taking time to enjoy the meal.
- Eating with friends and family.

Plenty of eating plans are out there — dietary approaches to stop hypertension, or DASH; flexitarian; therapeutic lifestyle changes; keto; paleo; and mind diets. But the Mediterranean diet is a holistic approach that encompasses healthy, delicious food and lifestyle choices that promote well-being. Many people who switch to this style of eating say they'll never eat any other way.

A simple way to get started is with some Mediterranean recipes. For more information, talk to your health care professional or dietitian.