

Eating for Heart Health: the Mediterranean Way

If you want to make a sustainable lifestyle change that can support your long-term heart health, the Mediterranean diet might be right for you.

Don't let the term 'diet' confuse you. It's not about counting calories. It's a healthy way of eating and living based on the traditional eating habits in the countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea. It combines the basics of healthy eating with the traditional cuisine of the Mediterranean region.



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"Incorporating this diet doesn't mean giving up flavor or satisfaction," says Dr. Ted Hodges, WakeMed Heart & Vascular - Cardiology. "It's about embracing a way of eating that is rich in taste, variety and tradition."

The Mediterranean diet is widely regarded as one of the healthiest ways to eat among cardiologists, nutrition experts and the American Heart Association.

Where It Began

The Mediterranean diet gained interest from health professionals in the 1960s after they observed that some Mediterranean countries reported fewer deaths linked to cardiovascular disease than those experienced in the U.S. and northern Europe.

Since then, research studies have demonstrated the diet's many health benefits – particularly as it relates to reducing cardiovascular risk. One study, published in 2018 in the *JAMA Open Network*, followed women adhering to a Mediterranean diet for 12 years and found that they had a 25 percent reduced risk of experiencing cardiovascular events, such as heart attacks and strokes, compared to women whose diets did not resemble a Mediterranean diet. Another large study, known as the PREDIMED Study, involved nearly 7,500 people at high risk for heart disease. This study found the Mediterra-

nean diet reduced the combined risk of stroke, heart attack and death from heart disease. The same study also suggested that people who followed the Mediterranean diet experienced reductions in LDL cholesterol, along with improvements in several other risk factors for heart disease. Finally, the study suggested that following a Mediterranean diet – even without calorie restriction – appeared to prevent the development of type 2 diabetes.

What Is the Mediterranean Diet?

Primary food sources found in the Mediterranean diet are plant-based, including vegetables, fruits, nuts, seeds, legumes, potatoes, whole grains, breads, herbs, spices and extra virgin olive oil. While there is no set meal plan or definition for the Mediterranean diet, here are common patterns to follow:

- Eat plenty of fruits, vegetables, whole grains and nuts.
- Extra virgin olive oil is preferred as a healthy fat source.
- Consume fish and poultry just 2-3 times a week.
- Limit red meat to once a month.
- Incorporate a moderate amount of dairy — 2 servings per day.
- Replace salt with herbs and spices whenever possible.
- If drinking alcohol, opt for red wine, in moderation.
- Avoid added sugars, processed meat, refined grains, refined oils and other highly processed foods.

Fruits and vegetables, whole grains, legumes and nuts are high in fiber, which can slow digestion and help you to feel full while eating less. They are also rich in vitamins, minerals and antioxidants, which help lower cholesterol and aid in digestive health, blood sugar control and weight management.

Many fish (including salmon, sardines, mackerel, herring and tuna) and plant-based foods (such as flaxseeds, chia seeds, walnuts and soybeans) are rich in omega-3 fats, which reduce inflammation and help reduce the risk of heart disease and stroke. Fish is also a rich source of protein and contains less saturated fat than red meat.

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Healthy Fats

The Mediterranean diet's focus on unsaturated fat sources offers major benefits for cardiovascular health. Numerous studies have found that replacing saturated fat with healthier fats commonly found in the Mediterranean diet can protect against inflammation, cardiovascular disease and death related to cardiovascular disease.

Olive oil and nuts are the main sources of fat in the Mediterranean diet. Healthy fats can also increase satiety, which helps reduce overeating.

More Benefits of the Mediterranean Diet

Beyond cardiovascular health, the Mediterranean diet can benefit numerous other aspects of your overall physical health, which can help improve your quality of life and longevity.

- 1 Reduce the risk of cancer
- 2 Improve cognitive function; may prevent dementia
- 3 Supports digestive health
- 4 Blood sugar control
- 5 Supports a healthy weight; reduces risk of obesity
- 6 Reduce the risk of type 2 diabetes



Tomato, Cucumber & White Bean Salad

YIELD 4 SERVINGS

Serving Size:
Approximately 2 cups

INGREDIENTS

Salad:

- 1 cup halved cherry or grape tomatoes
- ½ cucumber, halved lengthwise and sliced (1 cup)
- 1 15-oz. can low-sodium cannellini beans, rinsed and drained
- 8 cups mixed salad greens

Dressing:

- ½ cup packed fresh basil leaves
- ¼ cup extra virgin olive oil
- 3 T. red wine vinegar
- 3 cloves fresh minced garlic
- 1 T. finely chopped shallot
- 2 t. Dijon mustard
- 1 t. honey
- ¼ t. onion powder
- ¼ t. salt
- ¼ t. ground pepper

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1 Toss the greens, cucumbers, tomatoes and beans in a large bowl.
- 2 Prepare the dressing by placing basil, oil, vinegar, shallot, mustard, honey, onion powder, salt and pepper in a mini food processor or blender. Process until smooth.
- 3 Toss ingredients until well coated in dressing. Serve and enjoy!

Nutritional Information Per Serving:
246 calories, 15g fat, 2g saturated fat,
22g carbohydrates, 271mg sodium,
8g fiber, 5g sugar, 8g protein

The Mediterranean Lifestyle

Lifestyle plays a big role in health and aging, too. While it's a great place to travel, you don't have to travel to an island in Greece to reap the benefits of the Mediterranean way of life. To get the most out of the Mediterranean diet, incorporate these practices:

- Prepare and eat as many meals as possible with family and friends.
- Slow down. Try to sit at a table for 2-3 meals (or more) a week, taking at least 20 minutes to enjoy these meals.
- Cook at home more than you eat out.
- Eat locally sourced products when you can.
- Exercise regularly, ideally with others and by doing an activity you enjoy such as gardening, dancing or yoga.
- Avoid smoking or using any tobacco products.

"If you're looking to make changes to support your heart, the Mediterranean diet is a safe, sustainable and delicious place to start."

TED HODGES, MD, FACC



Seared Scallops with Lemon Garlic Pasta

YIELD 4 SERVINGS

Serving Size:
Approximately 2 cups

INGREDIENTS

16 large sea scallops (about 1 pound)	Salt and pepper to taste
4 cloves of garlic, minced	8 oz. angel hair pasta
2 T. olive oil, divided	2 T. shredded Parmesan cheese
Zest and juice of one lemon	2 T. fresh parsley, chopped

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1 In a saucepan, bring 3 quarts of water to a boil over high heat. When the water boils, reduce heat to simmer until you're ready to cook the pasta.
- 2 While the water is heating up, add the zest and juice of one lemon into a small saucepan. Add the garlic and 1 tablespoon of the olive oil to the saucepan. Stir until well blended and cook on low heat.
- 3 Heat a large nonstick or grill pan on high heat until very hot. Sprinkle the scallops with salt and pepper and drizzle with 1 tablespoon of olive oil. Toss to coat well. Sear scallops in hot pan, cooking about 4 minutes on each side or until golden brown and firm on the outside and milky white in the middle. (Internal temperature should be 145°F.)
- 4 While scallops are cooking, drop the pasta into boiling water. Cook for 2 minutes and reserve ½ cup of the pasta water. Drain the pasta, return to the pot and toss with warm olive oil mixture and ½ cup pasta water. Stir until pasta is well-coated.
- 5 Divide the pasta equally among the four plates, about 1 cup per plate. Top each with four scallops.
- 6 Garnish each plate with ½ T. shredded Parmesan cheese and ½ T. of fresh parsley. Serve and enjoy!

Nutritional Information Per Serving:

376 calories, 9g fat, 2g saturated fat, 48mg cholesterol, 43g carbohydrates, 429mg sodium, 2g fiber, 28g protein