

Healthy Lifestyle

Nutrition and healthy eating

The heart-healthy Mediterranean is a healthy eating plan based on typical foods and recipes of Mediterranean-style cooking. Here's how to adopt the Mediterranean diet.

By Mayo Clinic Staff

If you're looking for a heart-healthy eating plan, the Mediterranean diet might be right for you. The Mediterranean diet incorporates the basics of healthy eating — plus a splash of flavorful olive oil and perhaps even a glass of red wine — among other components characterizing the traditional cooking style of countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea.

Most healthy diets include fruits, vegetables, fish and whole grains, and limit unhealthy fats. While these parts of a healthy diet remain tried-and-true, subtle variations or differences in proportions of certain foods may make a difference in your risk of heart disease.

Research has shown that the traditional Mediterranean diet reduces the risk of heart disease. In fact, an analysis of more than 1.5 million healthy adults demonstrated that following a Mediterranean diet was associated with a reduced risk of death from heart disease and cancer, as well as a reduced incidence of Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases.

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends the Mediterranean diet as an eating plan that can help promote health and prevent disease. And the Mediterranean diet is one your whole family can follow for good health.

The Mediterranean diet emphasizes:

- Eating primarily plant-based foods, such as fruits and vegetables, whole grains,

legumes and nuts

- Replacing butter with healthy fats, such as olive oil
- Using herbs and spices instead of salt to flavor foods
- Limiting red meat to no more than a few times a month
- Eating fish and poultry at least twice a week
- Drinking red wine in moderation (optional)

The diet also recognizes the importance of being physically active, and enjoying meals with family and friends.

The Mediterranean diet traditionally includes fruits, vegetables and grains. For example, residents of Greece average six or more servings a day of antioxidant-rich fruits and vegetables.

Grains in the Mediterranean region are typically whole grain and usually contain very few unhealthy trans fats, and bread is an important part of the diet. However, throughout the Mediterranean region, bread is eaten plain or dipped in olive oil — not eaten with butter or margarine, which contains saturated or trans fats.

Nuts are another part of a healthy Mediterranean diet. Nuts are high in fat, but most of the fat is healthy. Because nuts are high in calories, they should not be eaten in large amounts — generally no more than a handful a day. For the best nutrition, avoid candied or honey-roasted and heavily salted nuts.

The focus of the Mediterranean diet isn't on limiting total fat consumption, but rather on choosing healthier types of fat. The Mediterranean diet discourages saturated fats and hydrogenated oils (trans fats), both of which contribute to heart disease.

The Mediterranean diet features olive oil as the primary source of fat. Olive oil is mainly monounsaturated fat — a type of fat that can help reduce low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol levels when used in place of saturated or trans fats. "Extra-virgin" and "virgin" olive oils (the least processed forms) also contain the highest levels of protective plant compounds that provide antioxidant effects.

Canola oil and some nuts contain the beneficial linolenic acid (a type of omega-3 fatty acid) in addition to healthy unsaturated fat. Omega-3 fatty acids lower triglycerides, decrease blood clotting, and are associated with decreased incidence of sudden heart attacks, improve the health of your blood vessels, and help moderate blood pressure. Fatty fish — such as mackerel, lake trout, herring, sardines, albacore tuna and salmon — are rich sources of omega-3 fatty acids. Fish is eaten on a regular basis in the Mediterranean diet.

- **Rein in the red meat.** Limit red meat to no more than a few times a month. Substitute fish and poultry for red meat. When choosing red meat, make sure it's lean and keep portions small (about the size of a deck of cards). Also avoid sausage, bacon and other high-fat, processed meats.
- **Choose low-fat dairy.** Limit higher fat dairy products, such as whole or 2 percent milk, cheese and ice cream. Switch to skim milk, fat-free yogurt and low-fat cheese.

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