

Mediterranean Diet for Beginners: Everything You Need to Get Started

Here is a quick how-to and meal guidance for beginning this ultra-healthy way of eating. Click on the links for additional reading and delicious recipes! A reading list is included at the end of the article for more information and many more recipes with meal planning ideas.

The Mediterranean diet may be the healthiest diet in the world. Rather than a strict meal plan, it is a way of eating that emphasizes enjoying whole foods and regular physical activity. Here, we give you a blueprint to follow the Mediterranean diet, whether you want to make small changes or overhaul your entire way of eating.

Read More: [8 Ways to Follow the Mediterranean Diet for Better Health](#)

What Is the Mediterranean Diet?

Featured Recipe: [Simple Grilled Salmon & Vegetables](#)

The Mediterranean diet is an eating pattern that follows the traditional way of eating in the countries surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. You do not have to live in Italy, Spain or France to benefit from the diet; however, many people are transitioning to it for the range of health benefits it provides.

The Mediterranean diet is not a strict plan. **Rather, it is a way of eating that emphasizes fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes and olive oil. Fish is the main protein source instead of red meat, pork or poultry. And yes, it includes red wine, in moderation. Fermented dairy (yogurt and kefir, which are both lactose-free) is consumed regularly but in moderate amounts. Eggs and poultry are occasionally consumed, but red meat and processed foods are not eaten regularly at all.**

The Mediterranean diet is associated with lower blood cholesterol, reduced risk of heart disease and stroke, lower risk of Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases and a longer life. Emerging research shows it may also reduce risk of, and benefit those with, depression, anxiety, type 2 diabetes and some cancers.

Read More: [7 of the Healthiest Foods You Should Be Eating But Aren't](#)

How to Get Started with the Mediterranean Diet

Featured Recipe: [Caprese Stuffed Portobello Mushrooms](#)

The idea is to mimic the healthy way of eating traditionally modeled by people in Mediterranean countries. Both the [Mediterranean Diet Pyramid](#), which was developed by Oldways, and [MyPlate](#), from the USDA, provide a general blueprint for what to eat at every meal. When in doubt, follow this simple rule of fractions: **Make half your plate fruits and vegetables, one-quarter of your plate whole grains, and one-quarter of your plate healthy protein. And, replace butter and margarine with olive oil, when you can.** Here are some more recommendations for how to fill those portions.

Focus on whole foods

Try These: [High-Fiber Whole-Grain Recipes](#)

Processed foods are not a traditional part of the Mediterranean diet. If it comes in a package, check the ingredients list. Choose foods with just one to three whole-food ingredients like bulgur, quinoa or oats. Whole foods include fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts, legumes, fish and olive oil.

Make vegetables the main part of your meal

Featured Recipe: [Cantaloupe & Cucumber Salad with Fresh Za'atar](#)

Fruits and vegetables should make up the bulk of your meals. The Mediterranean diet emphasizes 7 to 10 servings of fruits and vegetables each day, but even 3 to 5 servings per day have been shown to reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease. Think of small ways you can add more vegetables to your meals, like adding spinach to your eggs, loading up your sandwich with avocado and cucumber, and having an apple or banana with nut butter for a snack, instead of crackers.

Swap red meat for fish

Featured Recipe: [Roasted Barramundi with Asparagus Gremolata](#)

Fatty fish like salmon, lake trout, mackerel, tuna and herring are the main protein sources in the Mediterranean diet. These fish contain high doses of omega-3 fatty acids, which reduce inflammation and improve cholesterol levels. White fish and shellfish are also good lean protein sources, but are not as high in omega-3s. Red and processed meats are eaten rarely. Chicken, turkey, eggs, cheese and yogurt can be enjoyed weekly or daily but in moderate portions.

Read More: [5 of the Healthiest Fish to Eat \(and 5 to Avoid\)](#)

Cook with olive oil instead of butter

Olive oil is the main fat source in the Mediterranean diet. Total fat is not as important as the type of fat. The Mediterranean diet emphasizes eating more heart-healthy fats-poly- and monounsaturated fats-and fewer saturated and trans fats.

Saturated and trans fats raise LDL ("bad") cholesterol. Swap butter for heart-healthy fats like olive oil to lower your cholesterol and improve your heart health.

Related: [Confused by Coconut Oil: Is It Good or Bad for Your Health?](#)

Rethink your dairy

Featured Recipe: [Peach Caprese Skewers](#)

America tends to be a cheese-on-everything society. Instead of dumping cheese on top of everything, aim to eat a variety of flavorful cheeses in moderation. Choose strong-flavored cheeses like feta or Parmesan (a smaller amount suffices), and skip processed cheeses, like American.

Enjoy yogurt, too, but choose plain, fermented and Greek when possible. Skip the high-sugar, flavored yogurts; too much added sugar isn't good for your health. Try kefir, a delicious fermented milk beverage, that is lactose-free. If you do not like it plain, add a little maple syrup and cinnamon for flavor.

Related: [Which Is Healthier: Greek Yogurt or Regular Yogurt?](#)

Replace refined grains with whole grains

Featured Recipe: [Easy Brown Rice Pilaf with Spring Vegetables](#)

Swap white rice and pasta for whole grains like quinoa, wild rice, brown rice, bulgur, barley and farro. Whole grains are a mainstay of the Mediterranean diet and boast a range of benefits from lowering cholesterol to stabilizing blood sugars to weight loss. Whole grains are also high in B vitamins and fiber. **Look for ready-to-eat whole grain pouches in your grocery store.**

Beans (navy, kidney, great northern and more) and lentils have similar health benefits and are also a part of the Mediterranean diet.

Read More: [4 Whole Grains You Should Be Eating](#)

Snack on nuts

Featured Recipe: [Mediterranean Chickpea Quinoa Bowl](#)

Welcome the fat in nuts into your diet. Like olive oil and avocados, nuts are high in poly- and monounsaturated fats, the healthy fats. They have protein and fiber, too. Fat, protein and fiber are the perfect trio for staying full, keeping blood sugar stable, lowering cholesterol and reducing inflammation. Nosh on a quarter-cup of nuts between lunch and dinner. Walnuts have the most omega-3s, but all nuts contain healthy fats. Pair them with a fruit or vegetable if you need more to keep you full.

Read More: [Healthy Recipes with Nut Butter](#)

Try These: [Healthy Nut & Seed Recipes](#)

Skip the sugar (most of the time)

Processed cookies, crackers, refined (white) flours and sugars are not a part of the Mediterranean diet and should not be eaten often. Save cookies and ice cream for special occasions. In the Mediterranean region, people indulge in treats like gelato and baklava in moderation. Otherwise, they eat fresh fruit, including dates and figs, to satisfy sugar cravings.

Read More: [6 Swaps to Slash Added Sugar from Your Diet](#)

Enjoy red wine in moderation

That is about 5 ounces per day for women and 10 ounces per day for men. If you do not currently drink, you do not need to start drinking.

Related: [The Health Benefits of Drinking Wine](#)

More Reading and Recipes:

- [7-Day Mediterranean Diet Meal Plan](#)
- [9 Healthy Foods from the Mediterranean Diet](#)
- [30-Day Mediterranean Diet Challenge](#) – remember, if you do not drink wine, purple grape juice or pomegranate juice will work just great!

More from the Mediterranean Diet Center @ EatingWell.com

Click the link below that you would like to explore for more information.

[What a Day of Following the Mediterranean Diet Looks Like](#)

[8 Ways to Follow the Mediterranean Diet for Better Health](#) – *includes a great video*

[Recipes for good health: 4 fresh Mediterranean dishes](#)

[Easy Mediterranean Diet Plan for Beginners](#)

[Mediterranean Diet vs. Keto Diet](#)

[Low-Carb Mediterranean Diet Plan](#)

[The 10 Best Mediterranean Diet Snacks From Trader Joe's](#) - *you can find them at other grocery stores, too!*

[New Study Compares the Mediterranean Diet, Intermittent Fasting and the Paleo Diet for Weight Loss—See How They Stack Up](#)

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