

What is the Mediterranean diet?

The Mediterranean diet is a style of eating rather than a diet plan. It features foods eaten in Greece, Spain, southern Italy, France and other countries along the Mediterranean Sea. It emphasizes eating foods like fish, fruits, vegetables, beans, high-fiber breads and whole grains, nuts and olive oil. This style of eating includes limited red meat, cheese and sweets.

Why choose the Mediterranean diet?

A Mediterranean-style diet may improve heart health. It contains more fat than other heart-healthy diets. But the fats are mainly from nuts, unsaturated oils (such as fish oils and olive oil) and certain nut or seed oils (such as canola, soybean, or flaxseed oil). These fats may help protect the heart and blood vessels.

How can you get started on the Mediterranean diet?

Here are some things you can do to switch to a more Mediterranean way of eating.

What to eat

- Eat a variety of fruits and vegetables each day, such as grapes, blueberries, tomatoes, broccoli, peppers, figs, olives, spinach, eggplant, beans, lentils and chickpeas.
- Eat a variety of whole-grain foods each day, such as oats, brown rice and whole wheat bread, pasta and couscous.
- Eat fish at least 2 times a week. Try tuna, salmon, mackerel, lake trout, herring or sardines.
- Eat moderate amounts of low-fat dairy products, such as milk, cheese or yogurt.
- Eat moderate amounts of poultry and eggs.
- Choose healthy (unsaturated) fats, such as nuts, olive oil and certain nut or seed oils like canola, soybean and flaxseed.
- Limit unhealthy (saturated) fats, such as butter, palm oil and coconut oil. Limit fats found in animal products, such as meat and dairy products made with whole milk. Try to eat red meat only a few times a month in very small amounts.
- Limit sweets and desserts to only a few times a week — this includes sugar-sweetened drinks, like soda.

The Mediterranean diet may also include red wine with your meal — one glass each day for women and up to two glasses a day for men.

Tips for eating at home

- Use herbs, spices, garlic, lemon zest and citrus juice instead of salt to add flavor to foods.
- Add avocado slices to your sandwich instead of bacon.

- Have fish for lunch or dinner instead of red meat. Brush the fish with olive oil, and broil or grill it.
- Sprinkle your salad with seeds or nuts instead of cheese.
- Cook with olive or canola oil instead of butter or oils that are high in saturated fat.
- Switch from 2% milk or whole milk to 1% or skim milk.
- Dip raw vegetables in a vinaigrette dressing or hummus instead of dips made from mayonnaise or sour cream.
- Have a piece of fruit for dessert instead of a piece of cake. Try baked apples or have some dried fruit.

Tips for eating out

- Try broiled, grilled, baked or poached fish instead of having it fried or breaded.
- Ask your server to have your meals prepared with olive oil instead of butter.
- Order dishes made with marinara sauce or sauces made from olive oil. Avoid sauces made from cream or mayonnaise.
- Choose whole-grain breads, whole-wheat pasta and pizza crust, brown rice, beans and lentils.
- Cut back on butter or margarine on bread. Instead, dip your bread in a small amount of olive oil.
- Ask for a side salad or grilled vegetables instead of French fries or chips.

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