

Health and Lifestyle Nutrition

# There's Olive Oil in the Fountain of Youth: Benefits of the Mediterranean Diet

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Since the 1950s, researchers have been interested in the food and lifestyle habits of people who live on and around the Mediterranean Sea. Eating in the manner of residents of certain countries, such as Greece, Italy and Spain, can live up to [13 years longer](#). Though these countries have different cultures and customs, their dietary habits share certain commonalities. The combination of these eating habits is known as the [Mediterranean Diet](#), and has been proven to prevent heart disease, metabolic syndrome and dementia.

## What is the Mediterranean Diet?

The [Mediterranean Diet](#) is an eating plan popularized in the 1990s when nutritionists developed a food pyramid to popularize the trend. This way of eating emphasizes fresh fruit and vegetables, and whole grains, while limiting animal products, sweets and processed foods. The diet is based on the eating habits of rural communities living around the Mediterranean, who have greater longevity and fewer disease than other people living in Europe, despite poverty and little access to medical care. In addition to fresh produce and grains, the Mediterranean Diet also espouses extra virgin olive oil, as it is lower in saturated fats than other oils, including regular olive oil. Extra virgin olive oil is used in place of solid fats like butter and lard.

## Benefits a Mediterranean Diet?

Diets low in saturated fats, like the Mediterranean Diet, are shown to reduce cholesterol and [atherosclerosis](#), which decreases your risk for cardiovascular disease. Atherosclerosis is the buildup of plaque, cholesterol and tissue in your arteries, which can cause a blockage or rupture that leads to heart attack. [Extra virgin olive oil](#) (EVOO) is a major contributor to the disease fighting properties of the Mediterranean Diet. EVOO contains powerful [antioxidants](#) and other molecules that absorb free radicals and minimize cellular stress. Compounds in EVOO have been shown to reduce chronic inflammation, the cause of a host of serious illnesses like dementia, cardiovascular disease and cancer. One study in the [UK](#), with results replicated by a similar study in New York, showed the correlation between [Alzheimer's Disease](#) and other forms dementia, and eating a Mediterranean Diet. Both studies followed a cohort of elderly people, and used validated, objective analyses to measure subjects' adherence to the Mediterranean Diet. In both studies, the subject's participation in the Mediterranean Diet was inversely proportional to their experience of and risk for developing dementia. Eating a Mediterranean Diet has also been shown to increase longevity. A longitudinal study among subjects in [Greece](#) illustrated this link. The research tracked the diet and activity of a group of elderly people, all of whom had different, objective levels of adherence to a Mediterranean Diet. The study lasted 44 months and revealed that the more a person followed a diet that emphasized produce, whole grains and olive oil, the greater the likelihood that they lived through the study. Moreover, those people who did not follow a Mediterranean style diet were more likely to have died from cardiovascular disease or cancer as those who did eat according to the Mediterranean Diet.

## How to eat the Mediterranean way

The Mediterranean Diet is simple to integrate into your lifestyle with a few easy swaps.

- Replace red meats with fish and seafood, lean poultry and filling legumes for sources of protein.
- Use extra virgin olive oil in place of other oils, and saturated fats that stay solid at room temperature, like butter and margarine.
- Incorporate more leafy greens by adding a salad to every meal. Or, try creating entrée salads with plenty of raw vegetables and EVOO based dressings.
- Choose whole grain versions of your favorite foods, like breads, pastas and rice.
- Limit refined sugars and sweets, opting instead for low-sugar fruits (e.g. berries, citrus) and fruit-based desserts and snacks.
- Try adding a glass of wine to lunch or dinner a few days a week, to take advantage of the beverage's antioxidants.

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