

# Living Your Best (and Healthiest) Life on the Mediterranean Diet

You've probably heard of the Mediterranean diet.

Lots of whole grains, lean fish, and vegetables.

Very little red meat and eggs.

And plenty of that Mediterranean staple – olive oil.

At many major medical centers, including the Mayo Clinic, healthcare providers frequently recommend the [Mediterranean diet](#) for people who want to improve their [heart health](#).

But studies suggest the benefits of this lifestyle go far beyond your heart.

According to researchers at Harvard Medical School, the [Mediterranean diet](#) also helps lower your blood pressure and may reduce inflammation in your gut and brain.

All these benefits point to why this diet is noted by the [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#) as an example of a healthy eating lifestyle.

So let's talk about how the Mediterranean lifestyle diet works – and why it's such a game-changer for people who switch to it (and maintain it).

## Ten Quick Facts About the Mediterranean Diet

1. The [Mediterranean diet](#) was originally inspired by the cuisine of people living in olive-growing regions of southern Italy, southern Spain, and Crete (Greece).
2. The southern Mediterranean cuisine focuses on plant-based food choices and uses primarily [olive oil](#) for eating and cooking.
3. In the [Seven Countries Study](#) of risk factors for heart disease, researchers noted that southern Mediterranean people, among all the study participants, had the lowest rates of heart disease. They decided to study the local Mediterranean diet to see the reasons why.
4. Multiple [studies](#) over the years after this study have suggested that the Mediterranean diet [reduces the risk](#) of heart disease (lower cholesterol levels), high blood pressure (a risk factor for stroke), and type 2 [diabetes](#) (reduces inflammation).

5. Some studies suggest this diet may also [slow cognitive decline](#) (your brain health) by reducing brain inflammation.
6. The Mediterranean diet may also [lower gut inflammation](#) by changing the gut microbiome (the genetic makeup of your gut bacteria).
7. And because it's a high-protein, low-fat diet, it's helpful for [weight loss](#).
8. Researchers from the Harvard School of Public Health reintroduced the diet in the mid-1990s to the public as a heart-healthy diet.
9. Over the past 30 years, the Mediterranean diet has evolved into much more than a diet; it's considered a [lifelong maintenance healthy lifestyle](#).
10. The Mediterranean diet is noted as one of the three best healthy lifestyle diets in the [USDA's Dietary Guidelines for Americans \(2020-2025\)](#).

## What Exactly Is the Mediterranean Diet?

The Mediterranean [diet](#) focuses on plant-based, high-protein, low-fat, low-carbohydrate foods. Your meal plans call for real, whole food in moderate-sized portions.

Real, whole food might look like this: grill or cook fresh fish (for example, salmon fillets) instead of buying pre-made frozen breaded fish fillets.

To see how this healthy lifestyle works, check out the sample Mediterranean diet meal plans at [www.heart.org](http://www.heart.org)!

## What Foods Can I Eat?

- Plan to eat fresh fruits, vegetables, nuts, legumes (beans), and whole grains (in cereal, pasta, rice, and bread) two to three times/day.
- Rotate protein-based meals (fish, seafood, or chicken), with dairy products (low-fat yogurt, cheese, or milk) three to four times/week.
- Bake, steam, grill, or stir-fry the protein-based meals with olive oil and vegetables; no deep-frying!
- Cook with olive oil instead of butter (see [Olive Oil Fast Facts](#) ).

## **And What Foods Should I Avoid?**

- Avoid processed, pre-packaged or prepared foods.
- Skip high-fat, high-sugar, high-cholesterol foods.
- Use low-fat, low-sugar sauces for cooking.
- Avoid butter (high in saturated fats) for cooking.
- Limit eggs to one to two per week if your cholesterol/triglyceride blood levels are elevated.
- Eat red meat infrequently: about two to three times/month.

## **Are You Ready to Get Started on the Mediterranean Diet?**

Check out the following websites for more information on improving your heart health and making this your healthy lifestyle diet forever.

1. Harvard Health Publishing Guide to the Mediterranean Diet.  
<https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/guide-to-the-mediterranean-diet>.
2. American Heart Association: What is the Mediterranean Diet?  
<https://www.heart.org/en/healthy-living/healthy-eating/eat-smart/nutrition-basics/mediterranean-diet>.
3. The Mayo Clinic: The Mediterranean Diet. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/nutrition-and-healthy-eating/in-depth/mediterranean-diet/art-20047801>

### Love My Legumes

Legumes are beans (black, kidney, pinto, and navy), peanuts, soybeans, chickpeas, peas (green and black-eyed), and lentils.

### Olive Oil Fast Facts

- Olive oil is high in monounsaturated fat, which is a healthy fat.
- Olive oil is high in the essential nutrients of oleic acid and polyphenols.
- The healthiest olive oil is robust-tasting, extra-virgin olive oil, because it's cold-pressed and processed immediately after harvest, retaining these essential nutrients.
- Olive oil should be stored in a dark, glass bottle or a tin can in a cool, dark closet (away from sunlight).
- Use regular olive oil for grilling and cooking.
- Use extra-virgin olive oil for dressings and seasonings.

### What Are "Healthy" Fish and Shellfish?

- The healthiest fish contains omega-3 fatty acids, known as "healthy fats".
- Omega-3 fatty acids are unsaturated fats that may lower cholesterol and triglyceride blood levels, reducing the risk of stroke and heart disease.
- Omega-3 may also reduce inflammation in the gut.
- Salmon, albacore tuna, herring, and mackerel are high in Omega-3.
- Salmon is considered to be one of the healthiest fish choices.
- Cod, scrod, haddock, and flounder are lean whitefish.
- Shrimp, crab, clams, and scallops are lean shellfish.