

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

You've probably heard of the Mediterranean lifestyle diet — it's been around for a long time!

The Mediterranean diet consists of:

- Lots of whole grains, lean fish, and vegetables.
- Very little red meat and eggs.
- Plenty of olive oil—an essential part of the Mediterranean lifestyle!

So let's talk about how the Mediterranean lifestyle diet works — and why it's such a game-changer for those who switch to it (and stick with it).

Your doctor or healthcare provider may suggest the [Mediterranean diet](#) to help your [heart health](#), and it likely will do just that.

But here's some extra good news — studies suggest that the Mediterranean lifestyle diet offers additional benefits that go beyond your heart.

So, what are these bonus benefits?

Bonus Benefits of the Mediterranean Diet

- Helps lower your blood pressure.
- Reduces inflammation in your gut and brain.
- Helps you keep a healthy weight

All of these benefits are why the [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#) considers the Mediterranean lifestyle diet an example of a healthy eating plan.

Want to learn more about the Mediterranean Diet? Keep reading!

Ten Quick Facts About the Mediterranean Lifestyle Diet

1. The [Mediterranean diet](#) was originally inspired by the eating habits of people living in the olive-growing regions of southern Italy, southern Spain, and Crete (Greece).
2. The Mediterranean diet, especially the southern Mediterranean style, focuses on plant-based foods and uses olive oil for both eating and cooking.
3. A [global study across seven countries](#) found that people from the southern Mediterranean had the lowest rates of heart disease. They looked at the local Mediterranean diet to see if it was the reason for the lower heart disease (and it was).
4. Multiple follow-up [studies](#) have suggested that the Mediterranean diet [lowers the risk](#) of heart disease.
5. The Harvard School of Public Health introduced the Mediterranean diet to the public as a heart-healthy dietary choice in the mid-1990s.
6. You can lower your risk of heart disease by reducing cholesterol levels, managing high blood pressure (which decreases your risk of stroke), and controlling type 2 [diabetes](#) (which helps reduce inflammation in your body).
7. Some studies suggest the Mediterranean diet may also [slow cognitive decline](#) and improve your brain health by reducing inflammation.
8. The Mediterranean diet could also [reduce](#) the risk of other diseases by changing the genetic makeup of the bacteria in your gut, known as the gut microbiome.
9. The Mediterranean diet promotes a healthy body weight because it is a high-protein, low-fat diet.
10. Over the past 30 years, the Mediterranean diet has become more than just a diet; it's regarded as a [lifelong healthy lifestyle](#).

What Food Can I Eat on the Mediterranean Diet?

- The Mediterranean [diet](#) focuses on plant-based, high-protein, low-fat, and low-carbohydrate foods.
- Your meal plans should feature [real, unprocessed food](#) in moderate amounts.

- [Examples of real, unprocessed food include](#) grilled or freshly cooked fish (such as salmon) or chicken, Greek yogurt, nuts, beans, fruits, and vegetables, as well as whole-grain bread or pasta.
- Your goal is to eat fresh fruits, vegetables, nuts, legumes (like beans), and whole grains (such as cereal, pasta, rice, and bread) two to three times daily.
- Rotate protein-based meals, such as fish, seafood, or chicken, with dairy products like low-fat yogurt, cheese, or milk, three to four times weekly.
- Cook protein-based meals by baking, steaming, grilling, or stir-frying with olive oil and vegetables. No deep frying!
- Prepare your meals with olive oil instead of butter (see [Olive Oil Fast Facts](#)).

And What Should I Avoid Eating?

- Avoid processed, pre-packaged, or ready-to-eat foods, such as frozen fried fish fillets or pre-packaged pasta meals.
- [Prepared, pre-packaged foods](#) usually contain preservatives, artificial additives, and typically have more than five ingredients.
- If you can't identify the original source of the food (farm, garden, butcher), it has likely been processed.
- Avoid foods high in fat, cholesterol, and sugar.
- Use low-fat, low-sugar sauces for cooking.
- Avoid butter (high in saturated fats) when cooking.
- Limit eggs to one or two per week if your blood cholesterol levels are high.
- Eat red meat sparingly: about two to three times a month.

Are You Ready to Get Started on the Mediterranean Diet?

Visit these websites to learn more about improving your heart health and adopting a long-term healthy lifestyle.

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>

Olive Oil Fast Facts

- Olive oil is high in monounsaturated fat, which is a healthy fat.
- Olive oil contains high levels of essential nutrients, like oleic acid and polyphenols.
- The healthiest olive oil is extra-virgin, robust-tasting olive oil because it's cold-pressed and processed immediately after harvest, which helps retain 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 as a seasoning.

What Fish and Shellfish Are Considered “Healthy”?

- The healthiest fish are rich in omega-3 fatty acids, known as “healthy fats”.
- These “healthy fats” can help lower cholesterol and triglyceride levels in the blood, which may reduce the risk of stroke and heart disease.
- Omega-3 fatty acids may also help reduce inflammation in the gut.
- Salmon, albacore tuna, herring, and mackerel are excellent sources of omega-3 fatty acids.

- Salmon is widely regarded as one of the healthiest fish choices.
- Cod, haddock, and flounder are examples of lean, healthy whitefish.
- Shrimp, crab, clams, and scallops are examples of lean, healthy shellfish.

Legumes You Can Live On

- Beans (black, kidney, pinto, and navy)
- Soybeans
- Peanuts
- Chickpeas
- Peas (green and black-eyed)
- Lentils