

MEDITERRANEAN DIET

EBOOK



A Beginners Guide to understanding the healthiest diet in the world

When the word diet is mentioned, a restrictive diet that is difficult to stick to for long periods of time comes to mind. You've probably heard of the Mediterranean Diet and assumed it was just another fad diet.

Realistically speaking, the Mediterranean diet is an entire way of life based on the foods, values and traditions of the region.

Many chronic diseases can be prevented by the Mediterranean diet, which we will discuss later. This is due to the olive oil (1), vegetables, fruit, fish and whole grains that are included in this heart-healthy diet. These foods help the body's biochemical processes and prevent the onset of many non-communicable diseases (2). In other words, diseases that occur rather than can be caught off someone else.

Let's begin by looking at its origins.

Ansel Keys, an American dietitian, discovered in the 1950s that Mediterranean cultures were less prone to certain ailments than Americans. This was an area of great debate, but many of the theories remain relevant today. This research evolved into the idea that the Mediterranean diet may help people live longer. For twenty years, Keys researched the diet and the health of those who followed it.

A cohort of twelve thousand men and women in their 40s, 50s and 60s were interviewed about the food that they ate on a daily basis. These people lived in the Mediterranean region, including Japan, the United States, the Netherlands, the former Yugoslavia, Finland, and Italy. The results verified Keys' belief that the diet these people ate lowered the occurrence of some diseases in the general population. When comparing high-risk nations like Finland with the lowest risk ones, he discovered that the Greek island of Crete was a perfect example of the Mediterranean diet (3).

Ansel studied the diets of these people to learn more about the risk of heart disease when thinking about what they ate. It's hard to imagine now, but a heart attack was considered a normal part of aging in the 1950s, with no way to

prevent it. Dr Keys was one of the first to spot that this didn't have to be the case. Saturated fat and cholesterol are linked to an increased risk of death and heart disease when consumed in high amounts in the diet (4). We now take it for granted as a fundamental principle. To his credit, he found out about it by interviewing individuals about their diets and then correlating it with the death statistics he had collected.

Greg Drescher and Walter Willett reintroduced it to the general public (5), but not without controversy. Some research backed their theory, while others disproved it. However, there is no doubt that the Mediterranean diet is one of the best strategies to improve public health.

First of all, we need to understand that the **Mediterranean diet is a lifestyle**, inspired by tradition, more than just a list of foods. At the core of Mediterranean tradition is family; sitting down with family at least once a day to enjoy a meal, be sociable and chat.

The most important thing about the **Mediterranean diet is that it is a plant based diet**. A plant based diet means that the majority of the food comes from plants. These include vegetables, fruit, nuts, seeds, pulses, legumes and whole grains.

The other thing that it means is that you are eating fat that also comes from fruits and vegetables. It may not have occurred to you before, but olives are fruits, which means that olive oil is actually a fruit-based oil. You eat lots and lots of oil, specifically extra virgin olive oil, on the Mediterranean diet. All you need to remember is that this diet is heavy on vegetables. Eat them with every single meal and aim for three to nine portions a day.

This is because vegetables or plant foods are rich in vitamins, minerals, indigestible fibre, carotenoids, antioxidants and phytochemicals (6). These all have a protective action against disease, which we will discuss later.

Avoid processed foods and ready meals

Processed foods are full of hydrogenated oils and high fructose corn syrup. They are full of stuff, like flavouring and colouring agents, emulsifiers, that makes them very tasty and very rewarding. They release endorphins and dopamine in the brain and give you the same positive feeling that gambling, alcohol, tobacco and sex do. The people who develop them aren't daft because all this appeals

to your five taste sensations, gets you addicted and keeps you coming back for more and more (7) (8).

Processed foods tend to be made in factories and are mass produced. They go through various processes that can include pasteurisation, homogenization and even irradiation (9).

Who wants to eat factory food that has been deconstructed and enriched? Enriched may sound good, but it isn't. During processing, everything good is taken out, e.g., white bread, and then they add some of it back in at the end, which isn't so good. Calling a food product "enriched" may make it sound healthy, but it is better to eat food in its natural state (10).

This is not food; it is just a product. A glorified way of eating empty calories. There is no nutritional value except for calories and some macronutrients.

If all this sounds a little far-fetched, take a look at this website: <https://impactsofcheetos.weebly.com/production.html>. The makers of Cheetos openly describe the shocking way their popular snack is produced. If this doesn't put you off processed snacks, I don't know what will!

The Mediterranean diet is low in saturated fats

While we are talking about what foods not to eat, it is also best to avoid foods high in saturated fats. These include butter, red meat and hard cheeses. Whilst it is best to cut these foods out completely, I realise that they are delicious. The good news is that you can have them occasionally. And by that, I mean once a month or less. Just make sure they are of high quality and come from grass-fed, organic cattle. A small amount of quality dairy produce is acceptable on this diet.

Grass-fed, organic beef is the best (11). Try to avoid meat that was factory farmed, fed processed corn, never saw pasture and is pumped full of anti-biotics. It makes sense to make sure the red meat was happy and eating well before it became red meat.

What about venison? Game is not processed, it is wild caught. It is 50% lower in fat (12) than beef (13) and the deer eats a completely, natural diet in the woods. Deer once a month would be much better than beef. But, bear in mind, that the way in which it is cooked is important too. You shouldn't be frying this meat. Braised would be great or slow roasted. Having said all that, there is no reason why you can't enjoy a grass-fed, organic steak once a month with friends. Especially if you have been following the med diet for the rest of the month. Any

‘damage’ that the red meat will cause will be negated by all the healthy, nutritious foods you are eating the remainder of the time. This one meal can be enough to keep you on track and not feel deprived, if a juicy steak is your thing!

As mentioned, processed meats (cold cuts, salami, etc.) should not be eaten. But if you really fancy some, only have a very small portion (50g or less) once a month or so.

The Mediterranean Diet is a Fishy Diet full of healthy Omega 3 fatty acids

If you are not eating meat, you may wonder where you get your high quality protein from on this diet. The primary source of protein is fish. Fish should be eaten at least twice a week – preferably more.

Fish is one of the most complete foods as it is rich in proteins, heart-friendly omega 3 fats, vitamins and minerals such as zinc, calcium, magnesium and iron (14). In the Mediterranean diet, fish takes centre stage, alongside vegetables. This makes sense, as the Mediterranean countries surround the sea.

As with red meat, the fish needs to be line-caught, wild fish. Farmed fish still has protein but lacks most, if not all of, the healthy omega 3 fats and micro-nutrients (15). This is because the best sources of omega 3 are the foods that the fish eat in the sea (16). Stay away from farmed fish as they are fed cornmeal, which means they have little, if any, omega 3s.

Salmon is a great source of Omega 3 fatty acids, but sardines, mackerel and herring have even more (17). Unfortunately, these fish are quite strong in taste, which means a lot of people are not keen on them. Ironically, they are often described as ‘fishy’ taste which some people find off-putting.

Omega 3 fats are great for your heart and brain (17) so if you really don’t like the taste of oily fish but want to benefit from Omega 3, taking a fish oil supplement is worth considering.

Copious amounts of Olive Oil

While we are on the subject of healthy fats, another main component of the Mediterranean diet is olive oil. Olive oil must be of high quality and preferably extra virgin olive oil. This means that it should be certified cold-pressed from one sort of olive. It should not be blended.

Do not fall into the trap of buying cheap, blended, supermarket olive oil. And definitely do not buy olive oil that is in a clear bottle. It should also be sold in a

dark, glass (not plastic) bottle. This is to protect it from sunlight, which will oxidise it. Once you have bought it keep it in a cool cupboard. Light, heat and oxygen from the air break down the oil, causing oxidation, reducing antioxidants and causing it to go rancid, or “off” (18).

Olive oil has lots of health benefits that will be discussed further on in this e-book.

What about other sources of protein?

While fish is preferred to provide protein on the Mediterranean diet, you can also get protein from legumes, beans, poultry and eggs. Legumes include lentils, chickpeas and peas, which also provide lots of healthy fibre. Beans such as kidney beans, butter beans and black beans are vegetarian sources of protein and great in soups, stews and casseroles (19). You are allowed poultry and eggs on the Mediterranean diet. After all, seafood and fish can get a bit boring and can be tricky to cook correctly.

Try to find chicken that is organic, free-range and fed an omega 3-rich diet. The same applies to eggs. Stay away from factory farmed, corn-fed poultry. Always check the provenance of the food you are eating on this diet. Chicken should be eaten no more than twice a week, and a maximum of 4 eggs per week keeps you within the guidelines for this way of eating.

Cook the poultry in lots of spices - don't use salt or cover it with gravy. The best condiments to use to flavour Mediterranean-style dishes are aromatic herbs and spices, garlic and onion. Herbs and spices are effectively medicine (20) because they are packed full of phytochemicals that have a beneficial effect on health (21).

As previously mentioned, fruit is eaten on the Mediterranean diet. For those with a sweet tooth, there are plenty of tasty fruits to satisfy their sweet tooth, which is good news as sugary foods are not included in this diet. On the plus side, many fruits are high in water too which helps with hydration.

Now for some good news.

After talking about what you are not allowed to eat on the Mediterranean diet, it is time for some good news. The people of the Mediterranean countries enjoy a glass of wine every day. And so can you. Moderate alcohol is actually beneficial. Alcohol follows the principle of hormesis (22). In other words, stress your system a little bit, overcome it and it will become stronger. This principle also applies to

exercise and building muscles. So a little alcohol is actually better than no alcohol because it strengthens your system's response to it. This is why a small amount of high quality, red wine every day is recommended. But that doesn't mean that the results are amplified if you drink more. Stick to one to two glasses a day, maximum. Red wine also contains resveratrol, which has been shown to help protect the heart, increase good HDL cholesterol and fight cancer (23).

If you don't like red wine or don't drink alcohol, no problem! You can get resveratrol from black grapes or red grape juice. Make sure it is organic. It has a lot of the same health benefits as red wine does. Obviously, red wine is made from red grapes. It is great for the brain, for your mitochondria and can even mimic calorie restriction. That is far too complicated to go into here, but it is a definite benefit of this flavonoid.

So why are all these so-called rules in place? The main reason is that this diet is extremely healthy. These are the reasons why.

Benefits of the Mediterranean diet

Inflammation and oxidative stress are the main causes of non-communicable diseases (24). In other words, diseases you can't catch from someone else. These include cardiovascular disease, cancer, obesity, insulin resistance, pre diabetes, type 2 diabetes, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, stroke and COPD. Unfortunately, 41 million (7 out of 10) deaths are caused every year by these non-communicable diseases (25). Inflammation is also the leading cause of disability, back pain and auto-immune diseases, where the body attacks itself (26). The good news is that these diseases can be prevented before they even start by eating a healthy diet; or reduced and reversed if they have already started to take hold.

The Mediterranean diet plays a part in preventing these diseases.

This is because:

- It is low in saturated fat, which can increase LDL cholesterol levels and the risk of stroke (4).
- It is low in dietary cholesterol (27).
- It is high in fibre due to the large amounts of vegetables eaten. This curbs the absorption of carbohydrates and balances blood sugar. It also benefits the gut bacteria which, in turn, boosts mood, the immune system and digestion (28).

- Olive oil is rich in Omega 9 oleic acid, which lowers LDL (or bad) cholesterol without affecting HDL (good) cholesterol (29).
- It is rich in the essential fatty acid omega 3, from oily fish. This reduces high blood pressure (30) and high fat in the blood (31). This can lead to heart disease and strokes.
- It is rich in antioxidants, vitamins, minerals, polyphenols and phytochemicals (32), all of which boost health and immunity (33).
- It contains only natural sodium from foods. There is no added salt, which keeps blood pressure at healthy levels.
- Herbs and spices, especially garlic, ginger and parsley are used to flavour the food. These have many health benefits of their own from Mother Nature's medicine cupboard (34).
- The Mediterranean diet reduces the risk of developing type 2 diabetes mellitus because (35) it is rich in fibre. Also fructose, the natural fruit sugar, has a lower glycaemic index than sucrose/table sugar.
- Due to fewer processed carbohydrates, the diet is naturally less calorific than the contemporary western or American diet (36). This means any diseases associated with obesity are greatly reduced in those eating this healthy diet. In addition, people from the Mediterranean tend to have smaller portions. They also eat meals mindfully and slowly, which allows the stomach to send the message to the brain that it is no longer hungry (37). Something TV-dinner-guzzling Americans rarely do (38).
- The high intake of olive oil plays a part in reducing obesity and insulin resistance, which are both linked to the development of diabetes (39).
- The large intake of extra virgin olive oil has been shown to half the risk of bone fractures (40).
- Another benefit of the Mediterranean diet is hydration, which is key to good health. The body needs water to function efficiently, and by eating up to nine servings of vegetables and two pieces of fruit, you are hydrating yourself just by eating. This is because fruits and vegetables such as cucumbers, watermelon, blueberries, celery, pears and broccoli have up to 90% water content (41).
- Eating this omega 3-rich diet makes you feel happier. It has been shown to reduce levels of depression and improve mental health (42).

As with any diet, there are lots of myths, rumours and untruths that surround the Mediterranean diet. Let's take a look at some of them.

Myth #1: It's expensive.

This is false because fresh foods are much cheaper than processed foods. This is because they are more filling and you need to eat less to feel full (43). It is cheaper in the first place, and also cheaper when you have to pay out for poor health brought on by eating a poor quality diet high in processed foods, saturated fats and sugar. Obviously, organic food is more expensive than non-organic. However, any vegetable is better than no vegetable. If you buy organic, you reduce the effects of pesticides on the body. But I will repeat: eating non-organic vegetables is better than eating no vegetables.

As you are not eating meat more than once a month, try and buy one quality piece of organic meat if possible. Your body will thank you for it.

On top of that, almost half the US population with cardio-vascular disease is struggling financially due to medical bills (44). Bills they are paying because they are eating a poor quality diet, high in factory-produced products.

A study comparing the Mediterranean diet and what the USDA recommends you eat, found a saving of \$750 over the course of a year when eating the Mediterranean diet (45).

To illustrate further, people with high blood pressure typically pay out more than \$2000 a year (46). Is the cost of those organic vegetables starting to sound more appealing yet?

It's not just about the financial cost either. It is about quality of life. If you are healthy and happy, you can live a better life. There is no point in being well-off in a hospital, in pain or incapacitated.

Myth #2; Large quantities of wine and whole grains are acceptable on this diet.

The buzzword here is moderation. You can have moderate amounts of red wine and whole grains. However, just because they are good for you in small quantities doesn't mean they are even better for you if you eat and drink loads.

Myth #3: This diet focuses on eating and nothing else.

This isn't true either. You should be exercising on this eating plan and spending time with your family and friends. Better still, exercise with your family and friends. Make it fun! This boosts your mood and keeps things low-stress and sociable. The med diet is a way of life. A happy way of life.

Pair the diet with some regular exercise. Get some activity into your life - you don't have to run 10k every day. You only need to do moderate exercise for it to be beneficial. Something as simple as 15 minutes of walking every day, or some stretching first thing in the morning before you jump in the shower. Consider walking after you have eaten, as this increases the benefits.

It helps you burn off the calories you just ate and keeps the digestive system moving to prevent sluggish bowels. Plus, you are breathing in lots of lovely fresh air and exposing yourself to Vitamin D, the sunshine vitamin. Even if it's cloudy, you will benefit from being outdoors. It will also help you sleep. If it's raining or windy, just put on some warm, waterproof clothes. There's no excuse. We are waterproof after all. And what could be more fun than jumping in puddles?

This way of eating is embedded in family life. Spending time sitting eating around a table, with family, reduces the amount you eat, as opposed to eating alone whilst watching television (47), reduces depression and enhances overall quality of life and mental health (48).

Myth #4: It is hard to follow this diet when you eat out.

The best part about the Mediterranean diet over other diets is that you can stick to it wherever you go. You won't be stressed about whether or not you can choose something off the menu that fits in with this way of eating. Unlike paleo, keto or low calorie diets, life is a lot easier and stress-free.

Myth #5: There are not many choices for breakfast foods on the Mediterranean diet.

This is utter poppycock. For breakfast there is no reason you cannot eat salad, vegetables, fish or fruit.

Avocado on really good quality whole grain bread, with a poached, organic, free-range egg drizzled with extra virgin olive oil is a perfect example of a filling, healthy, Mediterranean-style breakfast. You can have fruit and salad vegetables with chunks of fresh sheep or goat's cheese. How about home-made granola with nuts, berries and oats?

Another great way to start the day is with spinach and goat cheese omelette with fresh tomatoes on the side. Tomatoes are rich in antioxidants and feature in many Mediterranean dishes. They contain lycopene, a substance that can protect against cancer (49). The heating process during the preparation of

tomatoes increases the availability and potency of lycopene, making any meal prepared with this food an excellent ally for our health (50).

Yoghurt is another great breakfast option. Choose thick, creamy Greek probiotic yoghurt with berries, sprinkled with nuts and seeds. This will keep you going until lunch time and give you a boost of vitamins and minerals.

All these delicious breakfast foods can be washed down with organic coffee or green tea. Both are high in antioxidants (51), (52). Grilled fish is another great breakfast on the Mediterranean diet. Who needs bacon, sausage or processed cereals like Cheerios or Cornflakes when you have all these tasty foods to choose from?

Who is this diet best for?

So who should be considering eating this diet? First of all, anyone with high blood pressure should definitely consider following this way of eating. Definitely anyone who has been diagnosed with T2DM. What about if you have a genetic predisposition to heart attacks? You most definitely should be eating this diet. It's not called the heart healthy diet for nothing. And I'm sure you want to minimise the risk of developing heart disease (2).

In fact, anyone who wants to be healthier, feel healthier, have more energy, reduce the risk of developing a life-threatening disease and slow down the aging process should consider following this diet.

But let's be clear that when I say diet, I mean what you eat. This is not a short term weight loss plan. As already mentioned, but it is worth saying again, it is a lifestyle. A permanent way of eating. To explain further, an elephant's diet is leaves and fruit; a lion's diet is wild game; a human diet should be vegetables, fruit, fish, some meat and red wine.

When is the best time to start this diet? Yesterday!

Bearing in mind what has already been discussed, children should be fed this diet as soon as they are weaned (53). Keeping them out of Macdonald's may prove difficult, but if they are eating a healthy diet most of the time, the odd burger won't hurt. And hopefully, as your child's tastes develop they won't want to eat a crappy diet.

Don't fall into the trap of thinking I'm young, I'm thin, I'm healthy. I can eat whatever I want to. If you start to eat this diet in your teens or twenties, you are 85% less likely to suffer from diabetes. 40 million children worldwide were found to be obese in 2011. By now, that number is highly likely to be higher. Many are pre-diabetic and show signs of fatty liver and high blood pressure (54). Childhood obesity is getting worse. Inflammation and oxidative stress start to manifest in the body as soon as you eat a poor quality diet.

Fat cells produce inflammation, where your body is effectively attacking itself, which isn't good. Your doctor won't check for that at such a young age. It quietly develops in the background, until you get ill and bam! It's too late! Prevention is always better than cure. It is never too soon to follow a healthy diet. Don't you want your heart and brain to be as healthy as possible? Ironically, obesity kills more people than starvation! More people die from non-communicable diseases (41 million per year) than from starvation (roughly 3 million a year), (55). We are literally eating ourselves to death.

In conclusion, the Mediterranean diet is a way of life. Life is meant to be enjoyed. To enjoy a long and happy life you need to be fit and healthy. So eat the fish and vegetables, drink the wine and water, spend time with those you love socialising with and eating with, having fun and exercising. Enjoy every moment. Follow the Mediterranean way of life and live a long, happy, healthy life with no death-bed regrets.

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