

The Mediterranean Eating Pattern¹

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Introduction

Americans looking for an approach to healthy eating may want to consider the Mediterranean eating pattern. The health benefits associated with this eating pattern are backed by many studies (Bach-Faig et al., 2011). Rather than being a restrictive diet, the Mediterranean eating pattern is a way of eating that can be adopted for a lifetime.



Figure 1. Plant foods, olive oil, and seafood are important components of the Mediterranean eating pattern.

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What are the health benefits of the Mediterranean eating pattern?

The Mediterranean eating pattern is associated with lower risks for type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and metabolic syndrome* (Bach-Faig et al., 2011).

What is the Mediterranean eating pattern?

The Mediterranean eating pattern, followed with local variations in countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea such as Spain, Italy, France, and Greece, emphasizes fruits, vegetables, legumes, whole grains, nuts, and olive oil. It also includes moderate amounts of fish and poultry. While red meat and sweets may be included, they are eaten less frequently and in small portions.

How to Follow the Mediterranean Eating Pattern

The Mediterranean eating pattern is highlighted in the Dietary Guidelines for Americans as a healthy way to meet nutrition recommendations. The foods highlighted in this eating pattern are readily available to consumers in the US. Following the guidelines described below can help you enjoy a variety of healthy foods that are consistent with the Mediterranean eating pattern and the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

Foods to Eat More Often

The Mediterranean eating pattern emphasizes plant foods and seafood, which are identified in the Dietary Guidelines as foods to eat more often. Let's see how the Mediterranean eating pattern can help you include more of these foods.

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Fruits and Vegetables

Add excitement to your meals by eating a variety of fruits and vegetables and choosing ones with different colors and textures. The Mediterranean eating pattern favors fresh, seasonal, and local food products (Bach-Faig et al., 2011). Choosing seasonal produce will help you include a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables at peak flavor for lower prices. Your local farmers' market is a great place to shop for fresh, local produce. You also will have the opportunity to talk to farmers about how they grew the crops and which fruits and vegetables will be in season in the coming weeks.

Whole Grains

Like the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, the Mediterranean eating pattern emphasizes whole grains. At least half of your daily grains should be whole grains, such as whole wheat bread, whole grain cereal, and brown rice.

Nuts and Seeds

Nuts and seeds provide protein and healthy fats (Vannice & Rasmussen, 2014). Sprinkle chopped nuts over whole grain cereal for a hearty breakfast. For a crunchy snack, try a small handful of nuts and seeds, or make your own trail mix with a variety of nuts, seeds, and dried fruit.

Olive Oil

In the Mediterranean eating pattern, olive oil is the primary source of fat. Since olive oil provides healthy fatty acids, try using it instead of lard, butter, and stick margarine. Instead of spreading butter on your bread, break off small pieces of bread and dip them in olive oil. When cooking, use olive oil to sauté vegetables (avoiding high temperatures) and prepare fish and poultry. Drizzle it over fresh salads, grilled or roasted vegetables, and whole grain pasta.

Fish and Seafood

Both the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and the Mediterranean eating pattern encourage the consumption of seafood. Like olive oil, nuts, and seeds, fish is a source of healthy fats (Vannice & Rasmussen, 2014). The Dietary Guidelines recommend the general population consume 8 ounces of seafood per week. The Mediterranean-style eating pattern in the Dietary Guidelines increases this recommendation to 15 ounces per week. It is recommended that women who are pregnant or breastfeeding consume 8–12 ounces of seafood per week because consumption of seafood that contains DHA (a healthy fat) is associated with improved infant health (US Department of Health and Human Services & US Department of Agriculture, 2015). However, some types of fish may have high levels of

mercury, so women of childbearing age, especially those who are pregnant or lactating, are encouraged to avoid species such as king mackerel, marlin, swordfish, orange roughy, tilefish (Gulf of Mexico), and bigeye tuna (US Food & Drug Administration, 2017).

Foods to Eat Less Often

- Red meat
- Processed meats
- Sweets

The Mediterranean eating pattern emphasizes getting protein mainly from seafood, poultry, eggs, beans, and peas. Red meat may be included on a limited basis, about once per week. Choose lean cuts of red meat to limit unhealthy fats and excess calories. Save sweets, such as soda, candy, cake, and cookies, for special occasions. On a daily basis, instead of eating sweets for dessert, enjoy a piece of fruit or fresh fruit salad after meals (Bach-Faig et al., 2011). Fruit is naturally sweet and colorful, which makes it an easy and attractive choice for dessert.

Wine in Moderation

The Mediterranean eating pattern includes moderate consumption of wine, especially red wine, with meals. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans are more restrictive than the Mediterranean eating pattern, recommending that adults limit daily alcohol intake to one serving for women and two for men. A serving of wine is a 5-ounce glass. Wine consumption in Mediterranean countries is often higher than one or two glasses per day. Women who are pregnant are advised to refrain from consuming alcohol.

Summary

The Mediterranean eating pattern provides a guide to enjoying nutritious foods in the context of a healthy lifestyle. Following the recommendations above will help you enjoy a new eating pattern and may even provide health benefits.

*Metabolic syndrome is a series of risk factors that increase the risk of developing heart disease and type 2 diabetes. It occurs when someone has a combination of at least three of the following conditions: central obesity, high blood pressure, high triglycerides, low HDL (the good cholesterol), or high blood sugar.

For More Information

“Mediterranean diet 101”: <http://oldwayspt.org/resources/heritage-pyramids/get-started-go-med>

“Mediterranean diet: A heart-healthy eating plan”:
<http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/nutrition-and-healthy-eating/in-depth/mediterranean-diet/art-20047801>

“Tips for families”: <http://oldwayspt.org/resources/heritage-pyramids/mediterranean-diet-pyramid/tips-families>

References

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