Mediterranean diet

Key points

- The Mediterranean diet is regarded as one of the world's healthiest dietary patterns
- A Mediterranean dietary pattern is abundant in vegetables, fruits, wholegrains, legumes, nuts and extra virgin olive oil. Fish and poultry feature more often than red meat
- Health benefits linked to the diet include a lower risk of heart disease, cancer, dementia and diabetes with improved mental health and longevity.

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The Mediterranean diet has long been considered a benchmark for a model of a healthy diet. It is also recognised by the World Health Organization as a healthy and sustainable dietary pattern. There is no one best way to eat for everybody, but a person can look to the Mediterranean diet as a guide to help make positive choices for eating healthier.

Interest in the health benefits of the Mediterranean diet began to grow in the 1960s. Arising from the observation that people in this region were healthier and had a lower risk of many chronic conditions.

The traditional Mediterranean diet originated in the olive-growing areas of the Mediterranean region. It has a strong cultural association with these areas. Although the term

‘Mediterranean diet’ is commonly used, it is more a dietary pattern or style of eating rather than a single fixed diet. That’s because the types of traditional foods featured in it can vary based on geography in the Mediterranean region.

The Mediterranean diet is not just about the foods eaten. There are also social and cultural factors as part of it such as eating with friends and family, post-meal siestas and lengthy meal times. These habits promote positive social connections and a less stressful outlook on life.



What does a Mediterranean diet look like?

The themes of a Mediterranean dietary pattern can be summed up as:

- daily consumption of vegetables, fruits, wholegrains and legumes
- including healthy fats such as extra virgin olive oil and nuts daily
- fish and seafood eaten at least twice per week
- moderate amounts of eggs, poultry and dairy products
- red meat is eaten at most twice per week.

A sample of what a day’s menu could look like when eating close to the style of a Mediterranean diet could be:

Breakfast: Greek yoghurt with strawberries and unsalted nuts

Lunch: Sandwich made with whole grain bread, hummus and salad vegetables such as tomato and cucumber

Dinner: Tuna (tinned or fresh) with leafy green salad, canned beans and extra virgin olive oil and a fruit salad for dessert

The Mediterranean diet is not just about what is eaten, but also what is not eaten or eaten rarely. Highly processed convenience foods, refined grains, sugary drinks, foods high in added

sugars, and processed meats such as salami, sausages and bacon are rarely eaten.

A Mediterranean lifestyle that goes with the diet involves regular physical activity, the sharing of meals with other people, and minimising stress levels.

Explore the Australian dietary guidelines

Health benefits linked to the Mediterranean diet

The Mediterranean diet is one of the most well-researched diets. And almost all this research points in a positive direction for favourable health benefits.

Using one scientific review on the Mediterranean diet to illustrate the scope of the research field, it included 13 meta-analyses of observational studies and 16 meta-analyses of randomised-controlled trials. A meta-analysis combines the results of several scientific studies. From this scientific review, convincing or highly suggestive evidence was seen for a positive role of the Mediterranean diet for:

- longevity
- cardiovascular diseases
- coronary heart disease
- heart attack
- cancer
- Alzheimer's disease and dementia
- diabetes.

Other areas where the research is growing and points to a positive benefit of the Mediterranean diet include:

- body weight
- blood pressure
- cholesterol
- bone health
- mental health including depression.

What part or parts of the Mediterranean diet that may explain its many health benefits is not fully understood. It is likely the combination of healthy foods that matters most, rather than any single standout food. And it is not just about the foods eaten in the diet that explain the benefits – it is also the foods that are displaced that you are eating less of such as sugary foods and highly processed foods.

When to see a dietitian



If you're wanting to make changes to your diet and eat more in line with a Mediterranean diet, an Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) can help you. We recommend seeing a dietitian if you:

- would like personalised advice and support from a professional
- need nutritional advice to help ensure you're meeting your individual nutrient requirements
- if you have specific nutritional needs, such as during pregnancy or for children

Accredited Practising Dietitians (APDs) are university-trained nutrition experts. They can help you with personalised, easy-to-follow and evidence-based advice.

APDs are Australia's most trusted dietetics professionals.

Find a dietitian

Top tips

- Eat 5-6 serves of vegetables each day
- Use extra virgin olive oil as your main cooking and dressing oil
- Each week, replace a meat-based meal with one containing legumes like lentils, chickpeas or kidney beans
- Aim to eat oily fish at least twice a week such as salmon, tuna, mackerel or herring
- Enjoy fresh or dried fruit each day.

This health advice page was peer-reviewed by an Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) in February 2023.