

## **Mediterranean diet**

### ***What is the Mediterranean diet?***

The Mediterranean approach is based on the traditional diet followed in countries such as Italy and Greece, where the rates of cardiovascular disease and obesity were typically lower (1). As well as a focus on certain types of food this approach also centres on being physically active (a good recommendation for health whichever dietary approach you choose) and seeing meals as enjoyable, social occasions. These factors are thought to contribute to the positive effects on health associated with the Mediterranean diet.

### ***What foods are encouraged?***

The Mediterranean diet consists mainly of natural, homemade, unprocessed foods. Typically this would include lots of olive oil, fruits, vegetables, bread, pasta, rice, potatoes, beans, nuts, legumes, seeds, herbs and spices. Fish and seafood are usually consumed a couple of times a week (or more) whilst this dietary approach includes moderate amounts of poultry, cheese, eggs and yoghurt. Red meat is eaten in moderation and sweets are rarely consumed, and there is a total avoidance of processed foods with added sugars and/or refined oils and grains.

Although the foods commonly included as part of a Mediterranean diet are reasonably well known the actual breakdown of macronutrients involved (i.e. how much fat, carbohydrate and protein to eat) is a more controversial topic. A rough guideline, based on a large research trial called the PREDIMED study (2), would be that the amount of fats and carbohydrates consumed would be similar (40-45% of total energy intake) with the rest of the energy coming from protein (about 15%). The Mediterranean diet is sometimes promoted as a low saturated fat diet, but this isn't really the case as it commonly includes full-fat milk and dairy products, and meals often finish with a cheese board.

### ***What does the research say?***

Results from the PREDIMED study suggest that people find it easier to stick to the Mediterranean diet than to a low fat approach, whilst those on the Mediterranean diet were also less likely to suffer from a major event such as a heart attack or stroke (2). A recent meta-analysis (the top level of evidence, if carried out well) found that following a Mediterranean diet resulted in improvements in glycaemic control as well as reductions in weight and cardiovascular disease risk amongst Type 2 diabetics (3). These findings were the same as those from another meta-analysis (4), supporting the benefits of this dietary approach.

### ***What's the downside?***

- Although there is good evidence for a beneficial effect on markers of health the use of the Mediterranean diet for weight loss is less clear cut, in part because many of the studies looking at it have not looked at weight loss as a priority. What evidence there is does suggest modest but consistent reductions in weight of about 1 to 2 kg per year when compared to controlled interventions.
- The lack of consensus over what exactly a Mediterranean diet contains can make it difficult to make practical recommendations, or to properly compare the findings from research studies to conclude what it is good for.
- Some foods marketed as being part of a Mediterranean diet can be very different to what would actually be eaten. For example, the cured meats that would be consumed in Mediterranean countries would usually be produced locally using natural methods and ingredients, whereas the versions that people may buy from the supermarket will often be highly processed and include unnatural preservatives.
- For people with insulin resistance the relatively high carbohydrate content (40-45% of total energy) may still be detrimental to health and make weight loss difficult. In this case it is worth considering lowering the carbohydrate content, as necessary, to meet any health goals.
- Some of the foods that are central to the Mediterranean dietary approach, such as oily fish and extra virgin olive oil, can be quite expensive. This might make it difficult for some people to include them regularly.
- Cooking fresh meals might be a big change for some people, and is more time consuming than using pre-packed meals or other fast foods. The benefits though, both in terms of health and enjoyment, make it well worthwhile!

### ***Some further reading/resources***

Kastorini CM, Milionis HJ, Esposito K, Giugliano D, Goudevenos JA, Panagiotakos DB. The effect of Mediterranean diet on metabolic syndrome and its components: a meta-analysis of 50 studies and 534,906 individuals. *J Am Coll Cardiol.* 2011;57(11):1299-313.

Mancini JG, Filion KB, Atallah R, Eisenberg MJ. Systematic Review of the Mediterranean Diet for Long-Term Weight Loss. *Am J Med.* 2016;129(4):407-15 e4

Mediterranean Diet 101: A Meal Plan and Beginners Guide

<https://www.healthline.com/nutrition/mediterranean-diet-meal-plan>

Reverse your diabetes diet: available [here](#)

“5 Studies on the Mediterranean Diet – Does it Really Work?”

<https://www.healthline.com/nutrition/5-studies-on-the-mediterranean-diet>

### ***References***

1. ANCEL KEYS, ALESSANDRO MENOTTI, MARTTI J. KARVONEN, CHRIST ARAVANIS, HENRY BLACKBURN, RATKO BUZINA, et al. THE DIET AND 15-YEAR DEATH RATE IN THE SEVEN COUNTRIES. AMERICAN JOURNAL OF EPIDEMIOLOGY. 1986;124(6).
2. Estruch R, Ros E, Salas-Salvado J, Covas MI, Corella D, Aros F, et al. Primary prevention of cardiovascular disease with a Mediterranean diet. The New England journal of medicine. 2013;368(14):1279-90.
3. Huo R, Du T, Xu Y, Xu W, Chen X, Sun K, et al. Effects of Mediterranean-style diet on glycemic control, weight loss and cardiovascular risk factors among type 2 diabetes individuals: a meta-analysis. Eur J Clin Nutr. 2015;69(11):1200-8.
4. Nordmann AJ, Suter-Zimmermann K, Bucher HC, Shai I, Tuttle KR, Estruch R, et al. Meta-analysis comparing Mediterranean to low-fat diets for modification of cardiovascular risk factors. Am J Med. 2011;124(9):841-51 e2.