

Mediterranean Dietary Approach - What I Need to Know



What is it?

A Mediterranean dietary approach is based around the quality of the food eaten. It typically focuses on eating natural, minimally processed foods - made at home using homegrown ingredients where possible.

Beyond this, how the food is eaten is also important. Meals are generally eaten in a social setting with family and friends. Meals are not eaten in a rush, people usually sit down together to eat them in a relaxed and leisurely manner.

When planning how many portions to have from each food group, a Mediterranean dietary approach is typically lower in carbs than a standard low fat diet, and also includes more fats. A similar amount of fats and carbs are eaten.

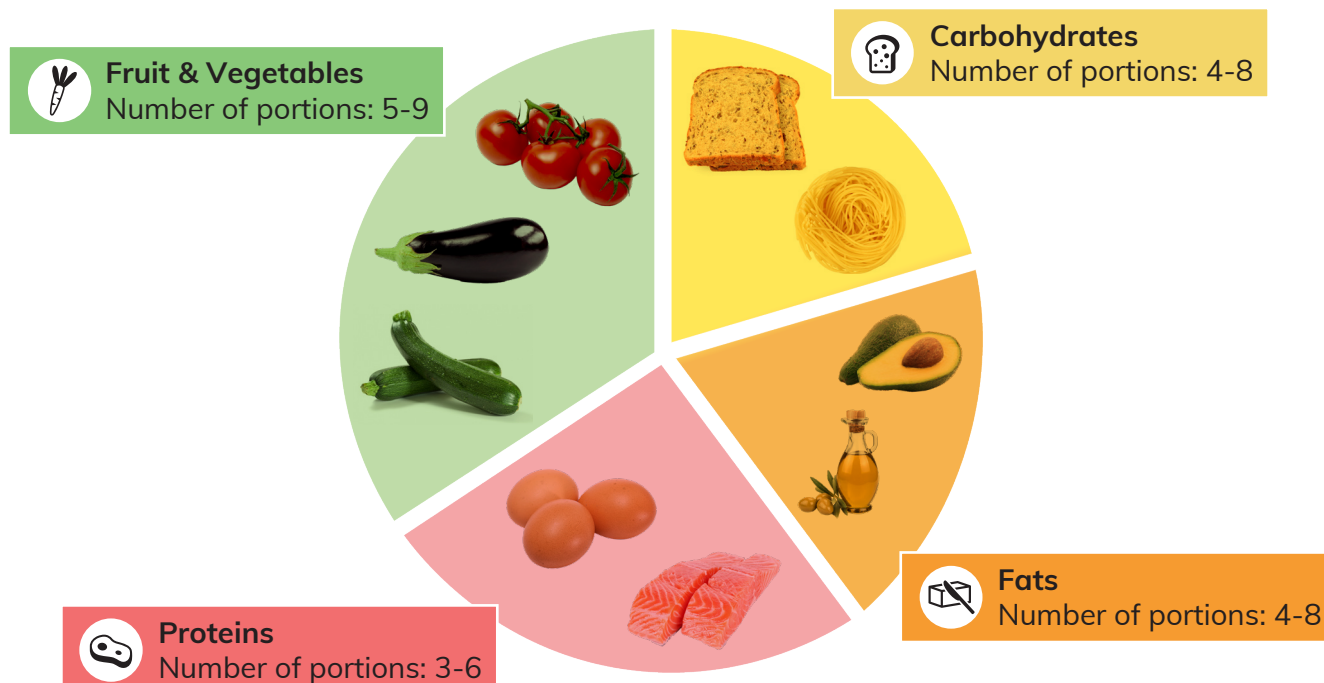
Using the Nutrition for Health model (see below), the suggested portion ranges are to have 4 to 8 portions of carbohydrate and 4 to 8 portions of fat each day. The exact number that is right for an individual will depend on their personal needs and goals.

“Mediterranean style”

A Mediterranean lifestyle is something that is widely considered to be healthy. The Mediterranean is a big place though, and there are lots of countries in this region with lots of different ways of living. So to talk about a Mediterranean diet as a single eating pattern isn't really accurate.

It is however true to say that some of the healthiest populations in the world have lived in this region. Although it is likely the climate and general way of living explains some of this, there are also similarities in the way of eating across this area. It is these similarities that a “Mediterranean style” diet tries to reflect.

As a rough guide: a portion of vegetables is about the size of your fist, a portion of carbohydrate is about one cupped handful, and a portion of fat is usually about the size of your thumb. For proteins, a portion of red meat is the size of your palm, and a portion of chicken or fish is roughly the size of your whole hand laid flat.



What are the benefits?



A traditional Mediterranean dietary approach is linked with a reduced risk of heart disease, certain cancers, and Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases. The reasons for this are not fully understood, but there are some key themes of the Mediterranean lifestyle we can try to adopt.

The carbohydrates included as part of this dietary approach are usually slower releasing than those in a typical modern diet (i.e., they have a lower glycaemic index). These foods slow down digestion and reduce surges in blood glucose, helping to reduce hunger and improve general health.

Other parts of the Mediterranean lifestyle are also thought to have health-promoting effects. These include being active, eating minimally processed foods, and having leisurely paced meals in a social setting.

The Mediterranean way of living is also linked with reduced stress levels, which may be just as important for health as what is on the plate!

What are the negatives?



Exactly which foods belong in a Mediterranean dietary approach is sometimes debated. This is largely due to the variety between countries in the region.

There are also misleading messages, such as that you should eat lots of pizza and large bowls of pasta, and/or that it involves drinking red wine to excess. However, this is not a true reflection of the diet of people in the Mediterranean, where the portion sizes are typically much smaller, and the quality of the ingredients is usually much higher, than what people would typically eat as part of a modern diet. These misunderstandings can lead to poor choices that are likely to have a negative impact on people's health.

What foods are usually included?

There is more than one way to follow a Mediterranean dietary approach, but there are some general guidelines to follow. You should eat mostly "real" foods, and these should include:

- Some good quality protein, e.g., from fish, seafood, nuts, seeds, beans, grass-fed meat and/or eggs.
- Cheese and yoghurt.
- Unrefined carbs, from wholegrains, pulses and/or other lower GI options.
- Plenty of vegetables and some whole fruit.

Flavour food with herbs and spices, and make use of extra virgin olive oil in line with the portion recommendations for this dietary approach.

Avoid sugar-sweetened drinks, added sugars, refined grains, refined oils and other ultra-processed foods (these tend to have a long ingredients list, as well as ingredients that you would not recognise as being foods in their own right).

A Mediterranean dietary approach seems to be one of the healthiest ways of eating. This is probably due in part to the high quality of the foods typically eaten, but there are a number of other elements of the lifestyle that we can also try to follow. This includes factors such as cooking meals from scratch, taking time to enjoy your food, eating in a social setting with family and/or friends (where possible), and avoiding snacking,

A Mediterranean dietary approach may be a good option for anyone that finds a low fat or low carb approach too restrictive, which would reduce the chances of them being able to stick to their new way of eating.



This topic is explored further on X-PERT programmes and in X-PERT Handbooks.
For more information, visit www.xperthealth.org.uk.