

Mediterranean Diet

Are there health risks?

Not likely, as long as you create a sensible plan.

The approach is generally safe for everyone, from kids and adults to seniors. Still, those with health conditions should talk with their doctor before making major dietary changes.



Does it have cardiovascular benefits?

Clearly. The Mediterranean diet has been associated with a decreased risk of heart disease, and it's also been shown to reduce blood pressure and bad LDL cholesterol. However, its cardiovascular benefits are most obvious among people of higher socioeconomic statuses, one 2017 [study](#) of nearly 19,000 Italian adults found. Still, if your Mediterranean approach largely shuns saturated fat (which contributes to high cholesterol), and includes healthier mono- and polyunsaturated fats in moderation (which can reduce cholesterol), you'll do your heart a favor. Here's some of the evidence:

- In the 2017 [study](#) of 18,991 Italians in the International Journal of Epidemiology, the more closely people adhered to the Mediterranean diet, the lower their risk of heart disease over 4.3 years – especially if they were well-educated. However, people with lower incomes didn't reap the same cardiovascular benefits as their better-off counterparts – even if they closely adhered to the diet – which may mean that higher-quality foods (read: expensive) make a difference. Still, there are many non-diet related health risks associated with lower socioeconomic status that could have affected the findings.
- In a 2016 [study](#) in the journal BMC Medicine, European researchers analyzed the eating habits and health outcomes of 23,902 British adults. They found that those who followed a Mediterranean diet most closely were significantly less likely to develop heart disease. The team even estimated that 1 to 6 percent of all heart disease cases and 2 to 14 percent of all stroke cases could be prevented by following a Mediterranean diet.

- A 2016 [study](#) in the European Heart Journal looked at the diets of more than 15,000 adults from 39 countries who were at risk for heart disease and found that the closer they followed a Mediterranean-style diet, the lower their risk of a major heart problem, such as heart attack, stroke or death.
- A study published in the New England Journal of Medicine in 2013 found that about 30 percent of heart attacks, strokes and deaths from heart disease could be prevented in high-risk people if they switch to a Mediterranean diet. These findings are based on the first major clinical trial to measure the eating approach's effect on heart risks; it ended early, after about five years, because the results were so clear. Researchers say the study's results provide evidence that the diet is a "powerful" tool in reducing heart disease risk, including among those already on statins or blood pressure drugs.
- A study published in October 2014 in the Canadian Medical Association Journal concluded that the Mediterranean diet may reverse metabolic syndrome, a group of risk factors that raises your risk for heart disease and other health problems, like diabetes. While the eating style did not prevent the condition from developing, it appeared to reverse it once a person had it. Researchers found that those on a Mediterranean diet with extra-virgin olive oil were 35 percent more likely than those on a low-fat diet to reverse metabolic syndrome, and those on a Mediterranean diet supplemented with nuts were 28 percent more likely to reverse it.
- A February 2014 [study](#) in the journal Plos One evaluated the diets of 780 male firefighters in the Midwest. The closer their habits matched a Mediterranean-style diet, the better their cholesterol levels and the less likely they were to gain weight or have metabolic syndrome. The study, funded by the Department of Homeland Security, was the first to look at the diet's effect on a younger working population in the U.S.
- A [study](#) published in the September 2015 issue of the journal Gut looked at about 150 Italian adults and found that vegans, vegetarians and others who complied with a mostly Mediterranean diet had more short-chain fatty acids, which are linked to a lower risk of heart disease, among other positive health benefits.

Can it prevent or control diabetes?

The diet appears to be a viable option for both.

Prevention: Being overweight is one of the biggest risk factors for Type 2 diabetes. If you need to lose weight and keep it off, and a Mediterranean diet helps you do it, you'll almost certainly tilt the odds in your favor. Research also suggests following a healthy Mediterranean-style diet may reverse or reduce the risk of developing metabolic syndrome, which can lead to Type 2 diabetes and heart disease.

- In a 2014 [study](#) in the journal Public Health Nutrition, Austrian researchers reviewed data from nine studies including 122,000 adults to investigate the association between the Mediterranean diet and diabetes risk. They found that greater adherence to a Mediterranean diet is associated with a 19-percent reduction in the risk of Type 2 diabetes.
- A study published in the journal Diabetologia in August 2013 suggests that people who follow a Mediterranean diet have a lower risk of developing Type 2 diabetes, compared with those who don't follow the eating style. The study was based on dietary and diabetes data from more than 22,295 people who were followed for more than 11 years. Researchers found that those who most closely adhered to a Mediterranean-style diet were 12 percent less likely to develop diabetes than those who followed it the least.
- A study published in January 2014 in the Annals of Internal Medicine focused on more than 3,500 seniors who were at high risk for heart disease but who didn't yet have diabetes. After four years, the researchers found that people who consumed a non-Mediterranean low-fat diet were most likely to develop diabetes. Those who followed a Mediterranean diet supplemented with extra-virgin olive oil were least likely to develop the disease, followed by those on a Mediterranean diet supplemented with nuts.
- A 2015 [study](#) in the journal Gut also suggests the Mediterranean diet can help prevent diabetes, since the short-chain fatty acids that the diet seems to promote are linked to a decreased risk of the disease.

Control: A Mediterranean diet can be in line with the American Diabetes Association's nutrition guidance. And because there are no rigid meal plans or prepackaged meals, you can ensure that what you're eating doesn't go against your doctor's advice. Some research has shown that diabetics on a Mediterranean diet may improve their levels of hemoglobin A1C, a measure of blood sugar over time.

- In a 2015 [analysis](#), Chinese researchers reviewed data from nine different studies with 1,178 Type 2 diabetes patients. Compared with patients on various other diets, those on the Mediterranean diet had improved their blood sugar control, BMI and weight, cholesterol, and blood pressure.
- In a 2014 [study](#) in the journal Diabetes Care, researchers found that the Mediterranean diet delayed the need for medication, boosted weight loss and promoted diet adherence more than a low-fat diet did among 215 Italian adults with diabetes.

Does the diet allow for restrictions and preferences?

Anyone can follow this approach – choose your preference for more information.

Supplement recommended? N/A

Vegetarian or Vegan: Yes, with a few minor tweaks you can easily replace any animal products with vegetarian- or vegan-friendly options. [See all plant-based diets »](#)

Gluten-Free: Yes, you can choose products that are certified gluten-free. [See all gluten-free diets »](#)

Low-Salt: Doable. It's up to you to stay under your limit, but the diet's emphasis on fruits and veggies should make it easier. Just make sure the nuts are salt-free. [See all low-salt diets »](#)

Kosher: Yes, you have the freedom to use only kosher ingredients. [See all kosher diets »](#)

Halal: Yes, but it's up to you to ensure your food conforms. [See all halal diets »](#)

Nutrition

Here's a breakdown of the nutritional content of a day's meals on a typical Mediterranean diet, alongside recommendations from the federal government's 2015 Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

Because this diet is highly individualized, your actual intake will vary. Diet figures were supplied by Oldways.