

Mediterranean Diet 101:

A Meal Plan and Beginner's Guide

Rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and heart-healthy fats, the Mediterranean diet is both delicious and nutritious. It may help manage your weight, protect your heart, and prevent diabetes.

There are no concrete rules for following the Mediterranean diet, but general guidelines can help you incorporate its principles into your daily routine.

This article takes a closer look at the Mediterranean diet, how to follow it, and how it can affect your health. We also offer some meal tips and direct you to some handy recipes.

What is the Mediterranean diet?

The Mediterranean diet is based on the traditional foods of countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea, including France, Spain, Greece, and Italy.

Some [research](#) has suggested that people living in these regions tend to be healthier and have a lower risk of many chronic conditions, compared with people who follow a standard American diet.

It typically [encourages](#) people to:

- **consume more:**
 - fruits
 - vegetables
 - whole grains
 - legumes
 - nuts and seeds
 - heart-healthy fats
- **consume less:**
 - processed foods
 - added sugars
 - refined grains
- **limit [alcohol consumption](#).**

Research has indicated that the Mediterranean diet can:

- promote [weight loss](#)
- help prevent [heart attacks](#), [stroke](#), and [type 2 diabetes](#).
- reduce the risk of premature death

For this reason, the Mediterranean diet is a suitable option for those looking to improve their health and protect against chronic disease.

How to follow it

There is no set plan for following a Mediterranean diet, but the following table offers some guidelines:

| | |
|------------------------------------|--|
| Focus on | vegetables, fruits , nuts, seeds, legumes, potatoes, whole grains, herbs, spices, fish, seafood, and extra virgin olive oil |
| Low to moderate consumption | poultry, eggs , cheese, yogurt, red wine |
| Limit or avoid | red meat , sugar-sweetened beverages, added sugars , processed meat, refined grains, other highly processed foods , beers, and liquors |

Features of a Mediterranean lifestyle that may also benefit a person's health include:

- [sharing meals](#) with others, without distraction from screens and other devices
- [consuming red wine](#) in small servings, with a meal, and not every day
- [flavoring foods](#) with herbs and spices rather than salt

Foods to eat

It is difficult to define which foods belong to the Mediterranean diet, partly because [there's variation](#) between countries.

Overall, however, the diet:

- is high in healthy plant foods
- is low in animal products and meat

- includes fish and seafood at least twice a week

You can include a mix of fresh, frozen, dried, and canned fruits and vegetables, but check package labels for added sugar and sodium.

You can base your diet on these foods:

- **Vegetables:** tomatoes, broccoli, [kale](#), spinach, onions, cauliflower, carrots, Brussels sprouts, cucumbers, potatoes, sweet potatoes, turnips
- **Fruits:** apples, bananas, oranges, pears, strawberries, grapes, [dates](#), figs, melons, peaches
- **Nuts, seeds, and nut butters:** almonds, [walnuts](#), macadamia nuts, hazelnuts, cashews, sunflower seeds, pumpkin seeds, almond butter, peanut butter
- **Legumes:** beans, peas, lentils, pulses, peanuts, chickpeas
- **Whole grains:** oats, brown rice, rye, barley, corn, buckwheat, whole wheat bread and pasta
- **Fish and seafood:** [salmon](#), sardines, trout, tuna, mackerel, shrimp, oysters, clams, crab, mussels
- **Poultry:** chicken, duck, turkey
- **Eggs:** chicken, quail, and duck eggs
- **Dairy:** cheese, yogurt, milk
- **Herbs and spices:** [garlic](#), basil, mint, rosemary, sage, nutmeg, cinnamon, pepper
- **Healthy fats:** extra virgin olive oil, olives, [avocados](#), and [avocado o](#)

Foods to limit

Foods to limit on a Mediterranean diet include:

- **Added sugar:** [added sugar](#) is found in many foods but especially high in soda, candies, ice cream, table sugar, syrup, and baked goods
- **Refined grains:** white bread, pasta, tortillas, chips, crackers
- **Trans fats:** found in [margarine](#), fried foods, and other processed foods
- **Processed meat:** processed sausages, hot dogs, deli meats, beef jerky
- **Highly processed foods:** fast food, convenience meals, microwave popcorn, granola bars

Beverages

Drinks to include are:

- [water](#)
- [coffee](#) and [tea](#) are also suitable, but with limited sugar or cream
- small to moderate amounts of [red wine](#), and only alongside a meal
- fresh fruit juices without added sugar

Drinks to limit:

- beer and liquor
- sugar-sweetened beverages, such as sodas, which are high in added sugar
- fruit juices with added sugar

Sample menu and recipes

Below is a sample menu for 1 week of meals on the Mediterranean diet.

Feel free to adjust the portions and food choices based on your own needs and preferences, and add snacks as desired.

Monday

- **Breakfast:** Greek yogurt with strawberries and chia seeds
- **Lunch:** a [whole grain](#) sandwich with hummus and vegetables
- **Dinner:** a tuna salad with greens and olive oil, as well as a fruit salad

Tuesday

- **Breakfast:** oatmeal with blueberries
- **Lunch:** caprese zucchini noodles with mozzarella, cherry tomatoes, olive oil, and balsamic vinegar
- **Dinner:** a salad with tomatoes, olives, cucumbers, farro, baked trout, and feta cheese

Wednesday

- **Breakfast:** an omelet with mushrooms, tomatoes, and onions
- **Lunch:** a whole grain sandwich with cheese and fresh vegetables
- **Dinner:** Mediterranean lasagna

Thursday

- **Breakfast:** [yogurt](#) with sliced fruit and nuts
- **Lunch:** a quinoa salad with chickpeas
- **Dinner:** broiled salmon with brown rice and vegetables

Friday

- **Breakfast:** eggs and sautéed vegetables with whole wheat toast
- **Lunch:** stuffed zucchini boats with pesto, turkey sausage, tomatoes, bell peppers, and cheese
- **Dinner:** grilled lamb with salad and baked potato

Saturday

- **Breakfast:** oatmeal with nuts and raisins or apple slices
- **Lunch:** lentil salad with feta, tomatoes, cucumbers, and olives
- **Dinner:** Mediterranean pizza made with whole wheat pita bread and topped with cheese, vegetables, and olives

Sunday

- **Breakfast:** an omelet with veggies and olives
- **Lunch:** falafel bowl with feta, onions, tomatoes, hummus, and rice
- **Dinner:** grilled chicken with vegetables, sweet potato fries, and fresh fruit

There's usually no need to count [calories](#) or track macronutrients ([protein](#), fat, and [carbs](#)) on the Mediterranean diet, unless you are managing your glucose levels.

Healthy snacks

If you start feeling hungry between meals, there are plenty of healthy snack options, such as:

- a handful of nuts
- a piece of fruit
- baby carrots with hummus
- mixed [berries](#)
- grapes
- Greek yogurt
- hard-boiled egg with salt and pepper
- apple slices with almond butter
- sliced bell peppers with guacamole.
- cottage cheese with fresh fruit
- [chia](#) pudding

Eating out

Here are some tips to help adapt dishes when you're eating out:

1. Choose fish or seafood as your main dish.
2. Ask for grilled foods rather than fried, where possible.
3. Ask the server if your food can be cooked in extra virgin olive oil.
4. Choose whole grain bread, with olive oil instead of butter.
5. Add vegetables to your order.

Shopping list

When shopping, opt for nutrient-dense foods, such as fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, legumes, and whole grains.

Here are some basic Mediterranean diet items to add to your shopping list:

- **Vegetables:** carrots, onions, broccoli, spinach, kale, garlic, zucchini, mushrooms
- **Frozen veggies:** peas, carrots, broccoli, mixed vegetables
- **Tubers:** potatoes, sweet potatoes, yams
- **Fruits:** apples, bananas, oranges, grapes, melons, peaches, pears, strawberries, blueberries
- **Grains:** whole grain bread, whole grain pasta, quinoa, brown rice, oats
- **Legumes:** lentils, chickpeas, black beans, kidney beans
- **Nuts:** almonds, walnuts, cashews, pistachios, macadamia nuts
- **Seeds:** sunflower seeds, pumpkin seeds, chia seeds, hemp seeds
- **Condiments:** sea salt, pepper, [turmeric](#), cinnamon, cayenne pepper, oregano
- **Seafood:** salmon, sardines, mackerel, trout, shrimp, mussels
- **Dairy products:** Greek yogurt, yogurt, milk
- **Poultry:** chicken, duck, turkey
- **Eggs:** chicken, quail, and duck eggs
- **Healthy fats:** extra virgin olive oil, olives, avocados, avocado oil

Potential benefits of a Mediterranean diet

The Mediterranean diet has been linked to a long list of health benefits.

Helps with weight loss

[Research](#) has not confirmed that following a Mediterranean diet will cause a person to lose weight. However, studies have suggested it may be a good long-term option for people seeking to manage their weight.

Data for people who followed the diet for 5 years indicated they were less likely to gain excess weight than those on other diets.

Benefits include:

- plenty of variety means the diet is not restrictive and therefore easy to maintain
- high fiber levels means a person is more likely to feel satisfied for longer and less likely to snack
- the healthy fats are less likely to cause heart problems linked to obesity

Promotes heart health

The [American Heart Association](#) recommends the Mediterranean diet as an evidence-driven options for preventing cardiovascular disease and stroke.

In 2021, for instance, some [researchers](#) compared the effects of the Mediterranean diet with those of a low fat diet. They concluded that the

Mediterranean diet was more effective at slowing the progression of plaque buildup in the arteries. Plaque buildup is a major risk factor for heart disease.

The authors of another [study](#) said the Mediterranean diet could support heart health by lowering blood pressure.

Supports healthy blood sugar levels

The Mediterranean diet [may help](#) stabilize blood sugar levels and protect against type 2 diabetes.

Studies have suggested that it may:

- [reduce](#) fasting blood sugar levels
- improve levels of [hemoglobin A1C](#), a marker used to measure long-term glucose levels
- [decrease](#) insulin resistance, which stops the body from using insulin to regulate blood sugar levels effectively

Protects brain function

The Mediterranean diet may benefit brain health and prevent cognitive decline as you get older.

One [study](#) found a possible link between following a Mediterranean diet, improved memory, and reductions in several risk factors for Alzheimer's disease.

A large [review](#) also linked the Mediterranean diet to improvements in cognitive function, memory, attention, and processing speed in healthy older adults.

Frequently asked questions

What exactly do you eat on a Mediterranean diet?

The Mediterranean diet focuses largely on fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and healthy fats.

What are the top 10 foods on a Mediterranean diet?

Examples of [foods to consume](#) on a Mediterranean diet include:

- chard
- broccoli
- grapes
- parsley
- olives and olive oil
- lentils
- buckwheat
- sunflower seeds
- avocado
- fish

You can drink a low to moderate amount of red wine, in small servings and with a meal.

What foods can you not eat in a Mediterranean diet?

You should limit or avoid your intake of:

- red meat
- processed foods, including meats
- refined carbohydrates, such as added sugars
- sweetened drinks
- liquor and beer

Are eggs eaten in a Mediterranean diet?

You can eat eggs in moderation, for example, [2–4 servings](#) weekly.

Is the Mediterranean diet anti-inflammatory?

In a [2018 study](#) researchers found that not following the Mediterranean diet, or not following it consistently, was associated with higher markers of inflammation in the blood. That's because many of the foods included in this diet are known to be [anti-inflammatory](#).

That said, [other research](#) suggests that more study is needed to determine its impact on various types of inflammation and diseases.