



The Mediterranean Diet for Beginners: A Starter Guide

A flexible approach to eating that emphasizes healthy foods—like fruits and vegetables, lean protein, and healthy fats—for a sustainable and heart-healthy lifestyle.

The Mediterranean diet is a balanced approach to eating based on the traditional cuisines of coastal countries like Italy, Greece, and Spain.

It focuses on eating whole grains, vegetables and fruits, legumes, nuts and seeds, as well as seafood and lean meats, low-fat dairy, and olive oil.

There's a ton of research showing the health benefits of the Mediterranean diet.

The Mediterranean diet has been popular for decades. It's recommended by doctors and dietitians, sustainable, and includes lots of delicious and heart-healthy foods.

It's not like other restrictive diets that say you can't eat this or that. Rather, it's a flexible approach to eating that emphasizes healthy foods—like fruits and vegetables, lean protein, and healthy fats.

What is the Mediterranean diet?

The Mediterranean diet isn't a strict plan, but a balanced way of eating that emphasizes fruits and veggies, as well as protein and healthy fats.

It's based on the traditional cuisines of countries that border the Mediterranean Sea, such as Italy, Greece, France, and Spain.

The diet focuses on plant-based foods like whole grains, vegetables and fruits, legumes, nuts and seeds, as well as seafood and lean meats, low-fat dairy, and olive oil.

It also incorporates the flavors, cooking methods, values, and lifestyle of the region—such as eating sustainably, enjoying high-quality foods, and staying physically active.

Where did the Mediterranean diet come from?

People who live near the Mediterranean have been eating this way for ages. But the American scientist, Ancel Keys, is credited with discovering, defining, and promoting the Mediterranean diet in the 1950s and '60s.

Keys recognized that people living in the small towns of Italy were in better general health than wealthy Americans living in New York. He thought that might be because of differences in their diets, so he led the Seven Countries Study (which included the United States, Finland, Japan, Holland, Italy, Greece, and the former Yugoslavia).

Through his research, Keys found that following a Mediterranean-style diet resulted in a lower risk of coronary heart disease.

The pros and cons of the Mediterranean diet

Everyone's needs are different, so there's no one diet that will work for everyone. Like any way of eating, the Mediterranean diet has both benefits and drawbacks.

What are the benefits of the Mediterranean diet?

The Mediterranean diet can improve metabolic conditions and heart health due to its emphasis on fruits and veggies, lean proteins, and heart-healthy fats.

Much research has been done on the Mediterranean diet (or MedDiet, as it's often called in studies) over the years, and experts have identified several health benefits:

- **Improved cardiovascular health:** Research has found that a Mediterranean diet can help significantly lower a person's risk of developing cardiovascular disease. In fact, one study found that people who followed a Mediterranean diet were less likely to experience a major cardiovascular event than those who followed a low-fat diet.

- **Reduced risk of chronic disease and increased life expectancy:** Research indicates that the Mediterranean diet can help lower cholesterol levels, protect against chronic inflammation, and reduce a person's risk of developing certain cancers.
- **Weight loss and reduced risk of type 2 diabetes:** Studies have shown that the Mediterranean diet can help reduce the risk of obesity and adult-onset diabetes, as well as mortality in overweight people.
- **Improved brain function:** Research suggests that following a Mediterranean diet can improve cognitive function in older people, including those with and without cognitive impairments, like dementia and Alzheimer's disease.

Another big benefit to the Mediterranean diet? It's easier to stick with than other popular diets (like a low-carb or keto diet) because it's much less restrictive.

For example, due to the extremely low amount of carbs allowed on the keto diet, many people find that they aren't able to eat certain foods they enjoy. This can make it difficult to stay on the keto diet long term.

The Mediterranean diet, on the other hand, is a more flexible way of eating because it doesn't cut out any food groups—it just emphasizes some foods over others. So enjoy that delicious brownie or glass of wine and just focus on eating whole foods during your next meal.

What are the drawbacks of the Mediterranean diet?

For some people, the most challenging thing about the Mediterranean diet is cutting back on sweets and processed foods. They're not forbidden, but they should be limited—and that can be a big adjustment.

And with the diet's emphasis on high-quality, organic, and sustainably sourced foods, it may be more expensive than a diet of processed foods.

Another drawback of the Mediterranean diet is that it can be difficult to follow if you don't have regular access to seafood or fresh fruits and vegetables.

While fresh ingredients are preferred on the Mediterranean diet, if they're not available, frozen or canned meats and veggies are good options.

What to eat on the Mediterranean diet (and what to avoid)

As we mentioned, there's no one way to follow the Mediterranean diet—there are 22 countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea, each with its own regional cuisines. But there are some general themes.

Vegetables, fruits, grains, and protein are all emphasized in the Mediterranean diet. But because the diet isn't highly restrictive, there's also room for treats and even an occasional glass of wine.

What Mediterranean diet foods can you eat?

While plant-based foods are the foundation of the Mediterranean diet, it's not about what you can or can't eat. It's more about how you portion your meals and how often you enjoy certain foods.

The Mediterranean diet pyramid was created in 1993 by the Oldways Preservation and Exchange Trust in partnership with the Harvard School of Public Health and the World Health Organization (WHO).

It breaks food groups into four broad categories to help guide your food choices.

- **Fruits, vegetables, grains (mostly whole), olive oil, beans and legumes, nuts and seeds, herbs and spices.** These foods, which sit at the bottom of the pyramid, should serve as the base for your meals and be enjoyed daily. Unlike the keto or paleo diets, there's no distinction between high-carb and low-carb vegetables—all fruits and veggies are encouraged (yep, even potatoes).

- **Fish and seafood.** Fish and seafood, such as salmon, shrimp, tuna, scallops, and white fish, are an excellent source of lean protein and omega-3 fatty acids. It's recommended to eat these foods at least twice per week. If seafood isn't your thing, that's okay—you can just focus on plant- and poultry-based meals instead.
- **Poultry, eggs, cheese, and yogurt.** These protein-rich foods can be eaten daily or weekly but shouldn't be the star of the meal. Whenever possible, choose less-processed dairy products—like unsweetened Greek yogurt, feta, parmesan, and fresh mozzarella cheese.
- **Red meat, sweets, and alcohol.** Red meat, such as beef and pork, along with sweet treats, sit at the top of the pyramid. These foods should be enjoyed occasionally. Red wine, in moderation, can also be part of the Mediterranean diet. (Cheers to that.)

