

[Excerpt from] The Mediterranean Diet: What Does the Evidence Say?

The Mediterranean diet gained traction after World Health Organization data from the 1960's found that coronary heart disease caused fewer deaths in Mediterranean countries compared to the US and northern Europe. Since then, many studies have been done on the Mediterranean diet and its success in reducing risk factors for chronic illnesses like heart disease and diabetes (1, 2). Consequently, many countries have used the Mediterranean diet as a basis for forming their own dietary recommendations and the World Health Organization now recognizes the diet as being both a healthy and sustainable eating pattern.

So, what is the Mediterranean diet?

The Mediterranean diet is a blanket term used to describe the typical eating patterns of people residing in Mediterranean countries. There is no one single definition of a "Mediterranean diet". Since Mediterranean countries are diverse, their eating patterns tend to be as well.

Generally, the diet is characterized by high amounts of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, potatoes, beans, nuts and seeds. It includes moderate amounts of dairy products, fish and poultry with low amounts of red meat and eggs. Olive oil is an emphasized source of fat and wine is included in low to moderate amounts. Foods that are avoided include added sugars, refined grains, trans fats, refined oils and highly processed foods (like sandwich meats, "low-fat" packaged products, etc.). (3)

In her blog, Katerina from The Mediterranean Dietitian outlines 10 helpful principals to following the diet with ease. These include:

- Use extra-virgin olive oil
- Eat more vegetables with meals & choose fruit for snacks
- Choose wholemeal (whole grain) pasta, rice and bread instead of white/refined grains
- Eat simple, locally grown food
- Have 2 servings of low-fat dairy a day
- Consume red meat once a week (or less)
- Eat fish 2 or more times a week
- Have up to 3 eggs a week
- Keep well hydrated
- Embrace daily movement (4)

What sets this diet apart from many other healthy eating patterns includes the emphasis on healthy fats and inclusion of wine. Healthy fats, including those found in extra-virgin olive oil, fatty fish (mackerel, herring, sardines, salmon, etc.), nuts and seeds can be excellent sources of polyunsaturated fats (omega-3 fatty acids). Omega-3's help to reduce inflammation in the body and decrease the risk of stroke and heart disease.