

MEDITERRANEAN DIET

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When in Rome, eat as the Romans do? Yes! Well, at least adapt some of the components of the traditional Mediterranean Diet. Researchers have been studying the eating patterns of the Mediterranean for the past 50 years and the results consistently show heart-protective benefits.

In the 1950's there was a significant, unexplained rise in the rate of heart disease in the United States. At that point, Ancel Keys, a scientist out of the University of Minnesota headed a study called the "Seven Countries Study" which looked at the eating patterns of seven countries: Greece, Italy, US, Japan, Finland, Yugoslavia, and the Netherlands. Through his research, he discovered that heart disease was the number one killer in some countries, while it was almost non-existent in others. He then began looking into the diets of each of the countries. In Mediterranean countries such as Greece & Italy, heart disease was rare, and Ancel linked this to their diets, which were rich in grains, fruits, vegetable, fish and olive oil.

Since then, there have been several other large studies, including the Lyon Diet Heart Study, which compared the Mediterranean diet to control diets. In this study, 605 heart attack survivors were separated into 2 groups. Half of the study participants were told to follow a diet low in saturated fat & cholesterol while the other half followed the Mediterranean eating plan. After 4 years, the group that followed the Mediterranean eating plan were 50-70% less likely to have recurrent heart trouble. Today there is universal agreement from the major health organizations that the Mediterranean diet is beneficial for heart health & may increase longevity.

The Mediterranean lifestyle includes plenty of daily physical activity and a balanced variety of foods. Sixteen countries border the Mediterranean sea so although there is not just one "typical" diet, there are some common dietary patterns which include: an abundance of fruits, vegetables, legumes (beans) and whole grain breads and cereal. Olive oil, nuts & seeds are the primary sources of fat and fish, poultry and dairy products are the primary sources of protein. It is also common to see a vegetarian style meal a couple times per week. Wine is also consumed in low to moderate amounts. The Mediterranean Diet contains only small amounts of red meat (beef, pork, lamb). Snacks include seeds & nuts (rather than processed foods like chips, candy, crackers) and fruit is the dessert of choice.

Unfortunately, many of the Mediterranean countries today are getting away from the traditional way of eating and including more highly processed foods due to the Western influence. Whether you live in the Mediterranean part of the world or not, you should adapt the traditional eating styles of the Mediterranean.

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MEDITERRANEAN DIET SAMPLE DAY:

Breakfast:

Small bowl of old fashioned oatmeal topped with berries, chopped walnuts and low fat milk.

Snack:

low fat yogurt cup

Lunch:

Large salad topped with beans, olives, grilled/ roasted vegetables, olive oil based vinaigrette and some fruit on the side.

Snack:

Handful of almonds

Dinner:

Small portion of grilled chicken, mixed vegetables and a baked potato or small portion of pasta or rice.

Dessert:

Fruit cup