

# The Mediterranean Diet

## The Mediterranean Region

The Mediterranean Sea is the largest inland sea. It is located between Europe, Africa, and Asia. Approximately fifteen olive-growing countries border the Mediterranean. These include Spain, France, Italy, Greece, Portugal, and the countries of North Africa. This area is called the Mediterranean Region.

## The Mediterranean Diet

Diet and way of life in the Mediterranean vary from country to country. But there are some eating patterns that are similar throughout the region. People in this area eat:

- Lots of fruits, vegetables, whole grain breads and cereals, potatoes, beans, nuts, and seeds
- Olives and olive oil as the main source of fat
- Little red meat
- Fewer dairy products, fish, and poultry
- 0-4 eggs per week
- Low to moderate amounts of wine



Overall, a typical diet consists of whole grains (brown rice, oatmeal, bulgur), legumes and dried beans (garbanzo beans, lentils, black beans), a variety of fresh vegetables and seasonal fruits, seafood and fish, nuts, onions, fresh herbs, garlic, wine, unsweetened yogurt, and extra virgin olive oil.

## Research

Since the 1950's, the diet and lifestyle in the Mediterranean Region has received increased attention. Studies indicate that people who eat a "Mediterranean diet" are less likely to have cardiovascular disease and cancer, and they live longer. The most well-known research on the Mediterranean diet is the Seven Countries Study. This study, done in the 1950's and 1960's by nutritionist Ancel Keys, looked at the relationship between diet and disease. The study involved 12,763 men ages 40-59. Results showed that men who followed a Mediterranean diet had less coronary heart disease. This and later studies indicated that a diet low in saturated fat can reduce cholesterol and the risk of heart disease. More than one-half of the fat in a Mediterranean diet comes from monounsaturated fat, mainly from olive oil.

## Why Olive Oil?



Nutritionally, olive oil is rich in vitamins A, B1, B2, C, D, E and K, and in iron. It is the richest dietary source of monounsaturated fat available. Monounsaturated fat does not raise blood cholesterol levels the way saturated fat does. There are several types of olive oil that are heart healthy, but only extra virgin olive oil is used in the diet of the Mediterranean region.

Olive oil is pressed from ripe olives after they are harvested. Oil from the first pressing is classified as *virgin*. Extra virgin simply means oil from the first pressing that is particularly low in acid — less than 1%. It is considered the finest oil, and is likely to have the fruitiest and most pronounced flavor.

## Health Benefits

Foods eaten in the Mediterranean Region have many health benefits. They are rich in:

- **antioxidants** - powerful scavengers of free radicals; free radicals are chemical substances that travel around in the body and cause damage to body cells
- **carotenoids** – found in red, orange, and yellow plant leaves, fruits, and flowers; they may protect the body against damage from light and oxygen
- **monounsaturated fats** - may delay or reduce development of cancers of the breast, colon, and skin
- **phytochemicals** - substances produced in plants to protect them against viruses, bacteria, and fungi

These are thought to promote the longer lives and lower incidence of chronic diseases found in this region.

## The Research Continues

Research to better understand the link between the Mediterranean diet and lower incidence of cancer and heart disease is continuing. Although the traditional Mediterranean diet contains as much as 40% of daily calories from fat, the incidence of heart disease and cancer in the Mediterranean countries are lower than in the United States. It is thought that in addition to the diet, increased activity and the lifestyle of the Mediterranean Region may also play a role. People living in this area have a more relaxed life style, and strong social support systems of family and friends.

## How To Eat the Mediterranean Way

Here are some ways to include the Mediterranean style of eating in your meals:

- Add color to your meals by choosing a variety of fresh vegetables. Include leafy greens, vegetable- rich salads and vegetable-rich soups.
- Use extra virgin olive oil in cooking and baking. Replace butter and other sources of fat in your diet with olive oil.
- Choose whole grains and a variety of dried and canned beans or lentils.
- Eat sweet potatoes or a whole grain like bulgur instead of white potatoes.
- Season your olive oil with garlic, onion or other fresh herbs.

- Enjoy a 4 oz glass of wine per day with meals. Check with your doctor about using alcoholic beverages.
- Choose water or a low fat, low sugar alternative to soft drinks.
- Eat a plate of fresh fruit and low fat cheeses at the end of each meal in place of desserts, which are high in refined sugars, flours and saturated fats.
- Consume less red meat. Twice per week add fish and poultry to your menu.
- Include a handful of almonds and hazelnuts as a healthy snack instead of commercially baked, salty snacks.
- Plan ahead! Create a weekly menu that limits processed foods.



**SELECTED RECIPES FOLLOWING  
MEDITERRANEAN GUIDELINES**

**Three Bean & Couscous Salad**

- 1 (6.0-ounce) package wild mushroom couscous
- 1/2 cup Italian salad dressing
- 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
- 1 1/4 cups diced, cooked chicken breast
- 1 -15 oz low sodium can cut green beans, drained
- 1 (16-ounce) can red beans, drained and rinsed
- 1 (15-ounce) can garbanzo beans or chickpeas, drained and rinsed
- 1 cup cubed part skim mozzarella cheese
- 1/3 cup pitted kalamata olives, halved

Prepare couscous according to package directions. In small bowl, whisk together salad dressing and mustard. Toss together couscous, dressing and remaining ingredients. Cover and chill 1 hour. Stir before serving. Serves 6.

## Spicy Mediterranean Fish

2 shallots, sliced  
2 large ripe tomatoes, chopped  
2 cloves garlic, crushed  
2-3/4 Tbs. white wine  
1 tsp. chilli powder  
2-3/4 Tbs. fresh basil, chopped  
6 black olives (optional)  
2-3/4 Tbs. olive oil  
4 whitefish fillets, about 6 ounces each

Combine first 7 ingredients in a bowl and set aside. Heat oil in a heavy nonstick skillet over medium high heat. Sauté fish 3 minutes or until golden. Turn fish and add reserved sauce to skillet. Simmer 3 minutes or until fish flakes easily with a fork. Serve with sauce.

## Salmon Cucumber Dill Salad

1½ lbs salmon filet, cut into 4 pieces, skin and bones removed  
1 TBS Dijon mustard  
½ TBS honey  
1 large cucumber, peeled, cut in half lengthwise, seeds scooped out, diced in ½ inch cubes, 3 cups  
1 large ripe fresh tomato, seeds, excess pulp removed, diced  
1 medium ripe, but firm avocado, diced in ½ inch cubes  
2 TBS chopped chives  
3 medium cloves garlic, pressed  
1½ TBS chopped fresh dill  
2 + 1 TBS fresh lemon juice  
1 TBS extra virgin olive oil  
salt and cracked black pepper to taste

Mix cucumber, tomato, avocado, chives, garlic and dill and set aside. Whisk lemon juice, olive oil, salt, pepper and toss with cucumber mix. Preheat skillet over med heat for 2 minutes. Rub salmon with 1 TBS of lemon juice and salt and pepper. Cook 2 min. While cooking, mix honey and mustard. Turn salmon and spread honey mustard on top of fish. Cook for another 2 minutes. Season with pepper. Divide cucumber mix between plates and serve with salmon

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