

The Mediterranean Diet

The research behind the Mediterranean diet has proven it to be the way to a longer, happier life - reducing risk for many chronic, debilitating conditions including heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and Alzheimer's disease. Happily, it tastes great too and is very helpful for weight control. Three primary strategies are involved in this healthful way of eating.

I. Minimize your intake of harmful fats and cholesterol.

Cholesterol is manufactured in the liver so it's only found in animal products. Limiting our intake of meat, dairy, and eggs will save us from a load of artery clogging fat and cholesterol. The monounsaturated fats in olive oil, fish, and nuts are protective against heart disease and other degenerative diseases as opposed to the saturated fat in animal products.

Processed foods are full of bad fats, sugar, salt, and refined starches so are also very harmful to your cardiovascular system. Regular consumption has the effect of producing chronic, low-grade inflammation throughout the body which is highly disease promoting.

Harmful fats and cholesterol can double the risk of developing Alzheimer's and will speed it's progression. Bad fats increase cholesterol in the blood which contributes to inflammation and damage to blood vessels in the brain.

II. Eat a plant-based diet.

Nutrition experts today recommend a low-fat diet that is high in plant foods - fruits, vegetables, grains, legumes, seeds and nuts. The high levels of nutrients in all unrefined plant products are very protective against most types of chronic disease. Consume a rainbow of colors to get all the different kinds of healthful plant chemicals.

Also, consuming these high-fiber, low-calorie foods is very helpful for weight control. In a 2-year Israeli study, people who followed this way of eating lost more weight than those

who ate a typical low-fat, weight reduction diet. Afterwards, more of the participants in the Mediterranean group stuck with the diet since it's satisfying and enjoyable as well as beneficial.

III. Change to the Cretian style of eating.

Ansel Keys, a pioneer nutrition scientist, died in 2004 at the age of 100. His landmark Seven Countries Study, conducted from 1958 - 1970, analyzed and compared the diet and lifestyles of thousands of people living in: the Netherlands, Finland, Yugoslavia, Italy, Greece, Japan, and the United States.

He was most interested in the traditional diet of the inhabitants of the small Greek island of Crete because they have one of the lowest rates of heart disease in the world and an unusually long life expectancy. From this study, the concept of the Mediterranean diet was born.

Mediterranean Diet and Lifestyle Guidelines

1. Vegetables: 2 ½ or more cups a day (may include legumes)
2. Legumes: 3 or more servings of lentils, peas, peanuts, soy products or beans daily
3. Fruit: 3 or more servings each day
4. Whole grains: 3 or more servings daily
5. Cold-water fish: at least 2 times a week – salmon, herring, mackerel, sardines, tuna, or trout provide essential omega-3 fatty acids
6. Nuts and seeds: A handful nearly every day
7. Meat & Poultry: Limit to 3-oz twice a week
8. Dairy: Emphasize low-fat and cultured milk products such as yogurt, kefir, and buttermilk. Substitute soy milk for cow's milk.
9. Olive oil: Use preferentially over other oils
10. Eggs: No more than 1 a day and cage-free are best
11. Be physically active for at least 30 minutes to an hour daily.

Research

There exists a wealth of scientific studies that show this way of eating to be highly effective for health and longevity.

1. Scientists followed the dietary habits of over 22,000 people living in Greece for almost 4 years. They found that those who followed the Mediterranean diet had a 75% reduction in risk for death from all causes. They also saw an inverse relationship between adherence to this way of eating and death from both heart disease and cancer.
2. Researchers in Spain tracked the diets of over 13,000 adults for more than 4 years. They found that those whose diets were closest to the Mediterranean style were 83% less likely to develop diabetes than those who were farthest from these healthy guidelines.
3. The British Medical Journal reviewed a dozen well-conducted studies. Researchers found that those who adhered to the Mediterranean style of eating had the lowest risk for heart disease, cancer, Parkinson's and Alzheimer's as well as lowest overall risk of death.

To maximize your success in following a healthy diet, try to eat the majority of your meals at home and pack your meals when away from home. This will help you avoid the hidden fat, calories, salt, and sugar so pervasive in American restaurant food and will save money as well.

It can take time and perseverance to develop a taste for whole foods, possibly even months, but eventually you'll find natural foods so much more satisfying than the usual processed fare. Also, your body will reflect the benefit in the way you look and feel.

Resources

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