



NUTRI-BYTES

The Mediterranean Diet: A Healthy Choice?

High fat diets...low fat diets...which is healthier? Research has shown that the *type* of fat in the diet, rather than the quantity, may be important in the prevention of chronic disease. Population studies and some controlled research studies indicate that the Mediterranean diet may be beneficial in improving health in many ways, such as improving lipid levels, reducing inflammation, and improving glycemic control. The diet is high in nutrients, fiber, and phytochemicals which contribute to overall health. Also, the diet is high in monounsaturated fat, a specific type of fat that may lower blood cholesterol. More research is needed to determine the long-term effects of Mediterranean-type diets and the mechanisms responsible for those effects.

What is a Mediterranean diet?

A Mediterranean diet is based on the food habits of those countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea, such as Greece, Southern Italy, Spain, Southern France, Tunisia, Morocco, and Lebanon. People in this region eat an abundance of fruits, vegetables, nuts, legumes, and whole grains and moderate amounts of fish, poultry, dairy products, and red wine. They eat very small amounts of red meat and refined grains. The Mediterranean diet is moderately high in fat (about 35-40% of its calories from fat) with the main type of fat being monounsaturated fat from olive oil and nuts. The diet has been known for being very flavorful and satisfying!

How do I change to a Mediterranean-type diet?

You can convert the typical American diet to a Mediterranean-type diet by making the following changes:

- Increase the amount and variety of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.
- Include good sources of monounsaturated fat such as olive, canola, or peanut oil, nuts, peanut butter, seeds, avocado, and olives.
- Choose poultry or fish instead of red meats. Eat lean cuts of red meat no more than a few times a month; avoid processed meats such as bacon, sausage, and luncheon meats.
- Choose low-fat and fat-free varieties of dairy products.
- Avoid refined white flour products, white rice, and sugar.
- Avoid butter, lard, mayonnaise, and creamy salad dressings.

Start with small changes to your diet, such as adding olive oil to cooked vegetables; adding avocado or nuts to salad; dipping whole wheat bread in olive oil; eating nuts and seeds as a quick snack; and using peanut butter as a fruit dip. Since the Mediterranean-type diet includes foods that are high in fat and calories, remember to watch your portion sizes! And don't forget to include physical activity in your daily routine.



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