

ONE SMALL CHANGE

# EAT MED- STYLE

Wherever you are in the world, eating a Mediterranean diet has benefits that go way beyond the dinner plate. *Anita Bean* explains why





**T**he Mediterranean diet – commonly recognised as a diet rich in plants and healthy unsaturated fats – has been making headlines ever since the term was coined some six decades ago. Today, no other diet has as much documented evidence for its positive effects. Research continues to show an increasing range of health benefits to eating à la Med – including improved cardiovascular health, a longer life and reduced chances of developing type 2 diabetes and cancer. The most recent evidence shows that this way of eating may also protect against dementia.

The benefits of what's become known as the Mediterranean diet first emerged in the 50s and 60s when scientists observed that chronic ailments such as heart disease were much rarer in Greece and Italy than in more northerly European countries. The Seven Countries Study, conceived by Dr Ancel Keys, a US physiologist, tracked the diets and lifestyles of 12,000 men over 50 years. It showed that diet and lifestyle have a direct effect on our heart health. Evidence linking a diet based on fruit and vegetables, beans and olive oil with good health and longevity has been mounting since then.

The Mediterranean diet gained momentum in 2013 after a team of researchers at the University of Barcelona studied more than 7,000 participants. Called the PREDIMED

trial, it found that those who ate Mediterranean diets supplemented with either nuts or extra virgin olive oil – both containing healthy monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats – were less likely to have a heart attack in later years than those who followed a low-fat diet.

A few years later, the EPIC-Norfolk study of 2016, published in the journal *BMC Medicine* and involving 23,902 British adults, showed that those who followed a Mediterranean diet most closely were 6-16% less likely to develop heart disease. The team estimated that one in 25 of all new cardiovascular-disease cases or one in eight cardiovascular deaths could potentially be avoided by following such a diet.

And now, a new study published earlier this year links the Med diet's health benefits to a reduced risk of dementia. Published in *BMC Medicine*, the study analysed medical and lifestyle records of more than 60,000 individuals in their 60s. The participants' diets were scored for how closely they matched the ideal Mediterranean diet (see box, right). Those whose eating habits were the best match were 23% less likely to develop dementia over the course of a decade than those whose diets least fitted the pattern.

But what defines the Mediterranean diet? It's more a way of eating than a set of strict guidelines, incorporating how one eats as well as what one eats. It's »

## A TASTE OF THE MED

*According to researchers on the PREDIMED trial, these are the components of the ideal Mediterranean diet.*

### PER DAY

**OLIVE OIL** 4 tbsp\*

**VEGETABLES** 2 or more servings (2 x 200g)

**FRESH FRUIT** 3 or more servings (3 x 80-100g)

### RED/PROCESSED

**MEAT** Less than 1 serving (100-150g)

**BUTTER, MARGARINE OR CREAM** Less than 1 serving (12g)

**SUGAR-SWEETENED DRINKS** Less than 1

### PER WEEK

**PULSES (BEANS, LENTILS, PEAS...)** 3 or more servings (3 x 150g)



**FISH** 3 or more servings (3 x 100-150g)

**NUTS** 3 or more servings (3 x 30g)

**CAKE OR BISCUITS** Fewer than 3 servings



**'A STUDY PUBLISHED EARLIER THIS YEAR EXPANDS THE MED DIET'S HEALTH BENEFITS, LINKING IT TO A REDUCED RISK OF DEMENTIA'**



# 'IT'S NOT JUST THE FOOD THAT YOU EAT THAT'S IMPORTANT, BUT ALSO HOW YOU EAT AND WHO YOU SHARE IT WITH'



rich in fruit and vegetables, pulses (such as beans, peas and lentils), wholegrains, olive oil, nuts and seeds, with low to moderate amounts of fish, eggs, poultry and dairy, plus moderate amounts of red and processed meat, alcohol and sugar. Fruit and vegetables, which are rich in fibre, vitamins, minerals and health-giving plant compounds, are central. The diet is also relatively rich in healthy fats, such as those found in olive oil, nuts and seeds, which are associated with lowering harmful LDL cholesterol. It is low in saturated fats, found in butter and red and processed meat, which can raise LDL cholesterol.

For people living in Italy or Greece who have eaten this way for centuries, it's just a way of life, one based around fresh, seasonal food that's unprocessed, home-cooked and eaten with friends

and family. "While many other diets include similar components to the Mediterranean diet, one important difference is how it places emphasis on cultural and lifestyle elements, such as cooking, biodiversity and seasonality," explains Dr Hazel Wallace, a medical doctor, founder of *The Food Medic* website and podcast, and author of *The Female Factor*. "It's not just the food that you eat but also *how* you eat and who you share it with."

The components of the Med diet are nutrient-packed, but the magic happens when you bring them all together in colourful meals. Breakfast could be as simple as seasonal fruit with a handful of mixed nuts, or plain Greek yogurt topped with granola and berries, or no-added-sugar muesli with nuts and seeds. Lunch options might include beetroot, feta and walnut salad with houmous; a tuna Niçoise salad or a Greek salad with wholemeal pitta bread and olive oil.

A glass of wine with dinner is a way of life in the Mediterranean – but you don't have to take this up. "Although

wine contains plant compounds that may confer health benefits, the exact 'dose' and duration isn't clear – and if dosing needs to be quite high, then the volume of alcohol is likely going to tip the benefit/harm balance in the wrong direction," says Hazel. "Have a glass of red if you enjoy it in moderation, but don't start for the assumed health benefits – you can find similar compounds in grapes, blueberries, cranberries and peanuts."

Lifestyles have changed drastically since the 60s. There isn't always time to prepare home-cooked meals, and not many families can eat together every mealtime. It can be hard to slow down the pace of modern life – but if you can take on some of the elements of the Mediterranean way of living, you're likely also to reap the health benefits.

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*Health writer Anita Bean is a registered nutritionist specialising in sports nutrition. She has worked with the London Marathon and is the author of The Vegan Athlete's Cookbook and The Runner's Cookbook.*



## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Looking to cut down on ultra-processed foods (UPFs) but not sure how to spot them? In his book *Ultra-Processed People*, broadcaster Dr Chris van Tulleken describes UPFs as foods wrapped in plastic and containing at least one additive that you wouldn't find in your kitchen, like emulsifiers or sweeteners. The book explores the evidence linking UPFs with heart disease, depression, cancer and dementia. The simplest way to avoid them? Rely on whole, fresh foods as the mainstays of your diet.



## ASK THE NUTRITIONIST

Joanne has an MSc and a PhD in nutrition and has been a Partner for 14 years

**Q** There's a huge range of oils available. Which are the best to cook with and what are the health implications?  
*Connie, Lincoln*

**A** The good news is that all oils can contribute to a healthy diet. Oils deriving from vegetables, nuts and seeds generally have a higher level of unsaturated fatty acids, which help to lower cholesterol and improve heart health.

Olive oil, in particular, has received some fantastic press in recent years; as the cornerstone of the Mediterranean diet (see page 102), there's real evidence that it can benefit your health. But there are a wide variety of olive oils to choose from. Extra virgin is made from cold-pressed olives and has a bold, fruity flavour. Mild and light varieties are blends of cold-pressed and processed oils. I would recommend extra virgin for salads, dipping bread or drizzling over pasta, and the milder, more economical blends for cooking, as their flavour is not so pronounced.

Some lesser-known oils are also worth exploring. Groundnut (peanut), often used in Asian cuisine, and avocado, with its mild and nutty flavour, are great options for high-heat cooking, as is rapeseed. Walnut oil has a pronounced taste that's delicious in dressings. Experiment with varieties for exciting flavours and nutritional benefits.

It goes without saying that all oils are calorie-dense, so keep an eye on how much you're using if you're concerned about calorie intake. Oil sprays can be a great way to add a light coating to the pan but look for those made with no additives.

*Do you have a question about healthy eating and nutrition? Email Joanne at [waitrose.food@dentsu.com](mailto:waitrose.food@dentsu.com) with the subject 'Ask the nutritionist'.*

# Better health

Health tips and trends, plus your diet questions answered by Waitrose nutritionist *Joanne Lunn*

## EAT GREEN

In-season romaine and cos contain 17 times more beta-carotene than iceberg lettuce. Beta-carotene is a powerful antioxidant, protecting our cells from damage. In general, darker lettuces are a better source of nutrients than lighter varieties.



ADDITIONAL WORDS ANITA BEAN INTERVIEW FAYE HARDY PHOTOGRAPHS ADOBE STOCK, GETTY IMAGES, STOCKFOOD

## Under pressure

Ever wondered why your in-flight meal rarely hits the mark? The combination of cool, dry cabin air, lowered cabin pressure and engine noise reduces the sensitivity of our taste buds. Perception of saltiness and sweetness drops by around 30% at high altitude, according to a study by German airline Lufthansa.

