

THE MED DIET: WHY IT MATTERS ALL YEAR ROUND

Fresh produce and olive oil aren't just
for the sunny summer months.
Mediterranean-style eating is an excellent
ally for your health, whatever the weather

Words Anita Bean

Recipes Eleanor Maidment **Photographs** Toby Scott
Food styling Myles Williamson **Styling** Julie Patmore

You may not be jetting off to the Med any time soon, but there's no reason why you can't eat as if you were there already – and reap the health benefits. With its emphasis on plant foods, the Mediterranean diet provides countless valuable nutrients to help fight winter ailments, not to mention improve your mood. Where to start? There's no single strict version of this diet – it's more about putting a whole-hearted emphasis on eating fresh veg, fruit, nuts, legumes and wholegrains, as well as olive oil, fish and red wine in moderation. It also encourages the limiting of red meat, processed foods and sugar.

Because it's associated with holidays, a Mediterranean-style diet is often thought of as a summer thing, but follow it all year round and you will bolster your defences against seasonal colds, coughs and sore throats. One study of 128 young children who had suffered from recurrent colds found that 53% experienced no colds for a year after adopting this way of eating. These protective benefits are thought to be down to the diet's high content of fibre, vitamins, minerals and phytonutrients (protective plant compounds).

The Mediterranean diet can also be a useful ally against the misery that colder days can cause in the form of low mood and fatigue. "With the risk of mental-health issues increasing in winter, it pays to nourish our gut-brain axis, the two-way communication between the gut and the brain," explains dietitian Dr Megan Rossi, founder of The Gut Health Clinic in London. "Following the Mediterranean diet, which is high in fibre and plant diversity, can improve mood through supporting the communication between the gut and the brain. Simply put, plants have the power to improve resilience to stress and help to regulate our emotions."

Research supports this thinking. A systematic review conducted in 2020 compared the effect of different eating patterns on people's quality of life and how much people felt their health affected their overall wellbeing. It found that the Med diet came out top for health and happiness. The more closely people followed this way of

eating, the better their health-related quality of life score.

In 2017, the Australian 'SMILES' trial, published in *BMC Medicine*, showed that adopting a Mediterranean diet may actually improve the mental health of people living with depression. In this study, participants were split into two groups at random. In the 'dietary support' group, participants received personalised eating recommendations based on the Mediterranean diet. Those in the 'social support' group had regular meetings with trained personnel to discuss topics of interest such as sport or music, but no input about diet. After 12 weeks, of the 56 individuals who completed the course, those in the dietary support group showed a significant improvement in their mental health: 32% were in remission from their depression, compared to 8% of those in the social support group.

Why? New research has shown that eating in this veg-forward way can positively influence the gut microbiota, the community of trillions of microorganisms that live in the gut. Dr Federica Amati is a medical scientist and nutritionist at ZOE, the personalised nutrition company. "At ZOE, we analysed the diet of all our members and found that those who were eating a range of different plant foods, including wholegrains, nuts and seeds, alongside healthy animal foods such as fish (similar to the Mediterranean diet), were more likely to have a healthier gut microbiome score," she says. The diversity of gut microbes is believed to result in increased feelings of wellbeing.

Luckily, many foods espoused

by the Mediterranean diet are widely available year-round, so it's easy to add that all-important plant variety to your diet. "The higher the number of different plant-based foods you eat, typically the more diverse your gut bacteria. It is this diversity that is linked to better gut and overall health, including better heart, skin and brain health," says Dr Rossi.

Eating Mediterranean-style during the winter months doesn't have to mean cold salads, either. Some vegetables, including tomatoes, peppers, spinach and carrots, are actually more nutritious when cooked. Roasting tomatoes releases lycopene, an antioxidant linked to improved heart health and protection against certain cancers. Bolstering your defences, improving gut health, boosting mood and wellbeing... they're all delicious benefits to cooking and eating Mediterranean-style.

Anita Bean is a registered nutritionist. She has worked with the London Marathon and is the author of The Vegan Athlete's Cookbook and The Runner's Cookbook.





TAKE IT TO HEART

Can the Med diet affect heart health? Tracy Parker, a senior dietitian at the British Heart Foundation, says: "It's long been known that eating a Mediterranean-style diet is good for your heart. The risk factors associated with cardiovascular disease, such as type 2 diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure and high cholesterol are also reduced when you follow a Mediterranean diet."

**GNOCCHI, ANCHOVY
& RED PEPPER ONE-POT**
(recipe overleaf) »

GNOCCHI, ANCHOVY & RED PEPPER ONE-POT

This midweek winner takes no more than 15 minutes and one pan to prepare. The cooked peppers and broccoli are great tossed through pasta, too – just grate over a little Parmigiano Reggiano to serve.

Serves 4

Prepare 15 minutes

Cook 20 minutes

- 2 tbsp olive oil
- 3 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- ¼ tsp chilli flakes
- 8 anchovies, finely chopped
- 180g pack **Red Romano Peppers**, deseeded and cut into thin strips
- 300g pack Tenderstem broccoli spears, trimmed and cut into 3cm lengths
- 500g pack gnocchi
- ½ x 25g pack basil, leaves roughly torn
- 150g ball Essential Italian Lighter Mozzarella, roughly torn

1 Heat the oil in a large (ideally ovenproof) frying pan over a medium-low heat. Add the garlic, chilli flakes and anchovies and cook gently for 3-4 minutes until the garlic starts to turn a little golden. Add the peppers and broccoli, increase the heat to medium-high and cook, stirring regularly, for about 10 minutes or until the vegetables have softened.

2 Bring a kettle of water to the boil and preheat the grill to high. Put the gnocchi in a large heatproof bowl and cover with just-boiled water. Let stand for 3 minutes, then drain and stir into the pan with the vegetables along with most of the basil, making sure everything is well mixed. If your frying pan isn't ovenproof, transfer the mixture to an ovenproof dish.

3 Season (remember the anchovies are salty), then scatter the torn mozzarella over the gnocchi and grill for 2-3 minutes until melted and golden in places. Scatter over the remaining basil to serve.



Per serving 1702kJ/406kcal/15g fat/4g saturated fat/46g carbs/5.5g sugars/6.2g fibre/19g protein/1.2g salt



BETTER HEALTH

As with most veg, the brighter the colour, the more phytonutrients (beneficial plant chemicals) there are. Red peppers contain more than yellow and orange ones.



ROASTED TOMATO & SQUASH SOUP

This hearty vegan soup packs in a mighty 3 of your 5 a day and is topped with crispy butter beans for extra protein. Any leftovers freeze brilliantly, so it's worth making a double batch.

Serves 4-5

Prepare 15 minutes + cooling

Cook 45 minutes



- 2 x 450g packs **Classic Vine Tomatoes**, halved
- 200g frozen Cooks' Ingredients Butternut Squash chunks
- 3 onions, roughly chopped
- 5 cloves garlic, peeled
- 400g can butter beans, drained and rinsed
- 3 tbsp olive oil
- 1 litre vegetable stock, heated
- 1 tbsp red wine vinegar
- ½ tsp caster sugar
- 4-5 tsp vegan basil pesto



1 Preheat the oven to 200°C, gas mark 6. Arrange the halved tomatoes, butternut squash, onions, garlic and ½ of the butter beans in 1-2 large roasting tin(s). Toss with 2 tbsp oil and season. Roast for 40 minutes, stirring halfway through.

2 Meanwhile, on a separate small tray, toss the reserved butter beans with the remaining 1 tbsp oil and season. Roast for 15-20 minutes until golden and crisp. When the vegetables are ready, remove from the oven and set aside to cool for 5 minutes.

3 Blend the roasted vegetables with the hot stock, vinegar and sugar in a saucepan with a stick blender (or whizz in batches in a large jug blender) until smooth. Season and add a little water to loosen, if needed. Reheat the soup and serve in bowls topped with the crispy butter beans and pesto.

 **3 OF YOUR 5 A DAY**  **Per serving**
(for 4) 1294kJ/
310kcal/12g fat/1.7g saturated fat/35g carbs/
22g sugars/12g fibre/9g protein/0.2g salt/
high in fibre/vegan



BETTER HEALTH

Did you know that tomatoes are healthier when they're cooked? This is because lycopene, the phytochemical that makes them red, is increased by more than 50% during the cooking process. Lycopene has been linked with improved cardiovascular health and may be protective against prostate cancer and cervical cancer. »



SEARED TUNA WITH BRAISED TOMATOES & CHICKPEAS

Topped with a seared tuna steak, this dish works just as well for entertaining as it does for a classy midweek meal. It's packed with flavour and is on the table in only 20 minutes.

Serves 2

Prepare 10 minutes

Cook 10 minutes

- 3 tbsp olive oil
- 1 shallot, finely chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- 270g pack **Cherry Vine Tomatoes**, halved
- 400g can chickpeas, drained and rinsed
- 100ml chicken or vegetable stock
- 2 heaped tsp Cooks' Ingredients Harissa Paste with Lemon
- ½ x 25g pack flat leaf parsley, leaves finely chopped
- 2 tuna steaks (100-120g each)
- ½ lemon, cut into wedges (optional)

1 Heat 2 tbsp oil in a frying pan over a medium heat. Add the shallot, garlic and a large pinch of salt, then fry for 2-3 minutes until starting to soften.

2 Add the tomatoes, cook for 1 minute, then stir in the chickpeas, stock and harissa. Simmer for 5 minutes or until the liquid has reduced a little and the chickpeas are saucy. Stir in the parsley.

3 Meanwhile, heat another frying pan with the remaining 1 tbsp oil over a medium-high heat. Season the tuna steaks with salt and fry for 2 minutes on each side or longer until cooked to your liking. Divide the tomatoes and chickpeas between 2 shallow bowls and top with the seared tuna steaks. Sprinkle over some freshly ground black pepper and serve with lemon wedges, if liked.



BETTER HEALTH

Most of the phytonutrients in tomatoes are concentrated in their skin. There's almost twice as much lycopene in the skin as in the juicy pulp.

EXTRA HELPINGS

Visit [waitrose.com/recipes](https://www.waitrose.com/recipes) for more inspiration, including chicken with red pepper relish (right)



HIGH IN PROTEIN

Per serving 1984kJ/473kcal/18g fat/
2.9g saturated fat/27g carbs/6.5g sugars/27g fibre/
45g protein/0.5g salt/2 of your 5 a day