

# Mediterranean diet

## What is the Mediterranean diet?

It seems that people living around the Mediterranean suffer less heart disease than those of us that live in the UK and northern Europe. This has led researchers to question whether the Mediterranean diet might be a model diet which could contribute to improved health and longevity.

## What foods make up the Mediterranean diet?

Traditionally people in the Mediterranean have:

- more fruit and vegetables, wholegrain breads and cereals, nuts, pulses (peas, beans and lentils) seeds and fish
- less saturated fat from dairy and red meat sources
- moderate alcohol consumption
- higher levels of sunshine and more oily fish which results in good levels of vitamin D

## How does this affect nutrient intakes?

The Mediterranean diet is:

- rich in monounsaturated oils which are heart healthy (olive oil and nuts)
- a good source of omega 3 fatty acids (seafood, especially oily fish)
- rich in potassium (wholegrain cereals, fruit, vegetables and nuts)
- rich in fibre including soluble fibre (wholegrain cereals, vegetables, fruit, beans, peas)
- rich in antioxidants including vitamins E and C, carotenoids and flavonoids.
- rich in B vitamins including folic acid
- low in saturated fat (by reducing red meat and high fat dairy foods)

## How might these changes in diet affect Heart Health?

- It is the combination of lowering saturated fat and increasing monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats (including omega 3's) which can help to reduce LDL (bad) cholesterol and increased HDL (good) cholesterol
- A diet rich in potassium and low in salt favours a reduction in blood pressure in people who have hypertension
- Initial research suggests that diets rich in wholegrain can help protect against heart disease, diabetes and cancer risk
- Folic acid and B vitamins appear to have a role in reducing homocysteine. Raised homocysteine maybe an independent risk factor for heart disease
- Soluble fibre from oats, pulses and some fruits and vegetables help to reduce the amount of cholesterol and bile (a by-product of cholesterol) that your body absorbs. The effect is to ultimately reduce cholesterol levels
- Increasing fruit and vegetable intake has been linked to improved health for many years. The huge range of colourful produce in the Mediterranean results in a diet rich in beneficial plant chemicals that are thought to help prevent heart disease and cancer
- Increased oily fish intake is also a good dietary source of vitamin D, a nutrient that increasingly seems to play a part in heart health

## Tips to help you adopt a Mediterranean diet

### Eat plenty of:

- Fruit and vegetables – fresh, frozen, canned or dried. Aim for at least 5 servings every day, more if you can and include a wide variety. These foods are rich in essential nutrients, they are also low in calories
- Starchy carbohydrate foods – base meals on foods such as bread, noodles, chapatti, rice, pasta and yams. Wholegrain varieties are generally higher in fibre, so good for digestive health too
- Fish. White fish is low in fat and calories, so helpful when managing weight, and oily fish, although higher in fat, contains essential omega-3 fats and vitamin D. People with raised cholesterol are encouraged to eat 2-3 servings of oily fish each week (salmon, pilchards, mackerel, sardines)
- Nuts and nut butters – unsalted varieties. Nut are rich in monounsaturated fats. As a guide try to eat about 30g (a handful) each day

### Lifestyle:

- Aim to maintain a healthy body weight. Not only does being overweight raise cholesterol levels it can increase the risk of developing type 2 diabetes
- People in the Mediterranean are often more active than we are. Find a physical activity that you enjoy (gardening, walking, golf) and aim to be physically active for at least half an hour on most days of the week
- Look for ways in which you can reduce stress levels, perhaps by taking more time for yourself, limiting work commitments or asking for help
- People over 65 should invest in a vitamin D supplement. Ten micrograms (10mcg) is all you need each day

### In cooking, spreading and salad dressings:

- Use oils rich in monounsaturated fats, such as olive and rapeseed (canola) oils, and spreading fats made from these. All fats are 'fattening' because they are rich in calories, so use sparingly to avoid weight gain

### Cut down on:

- High fat foods, especially foods high in saturated fat (fatty meats and meat products, butter, cream and many processed foods)
- Check labels for low fat options (3g or less per 100g is low in fat) and cut back on foods containing a lot of fat (20g or more per 100g)
- For saturated fat, look for foods with 1g or less saturates per 100g (5g or more per 100g means the product is high in saturates)
- Sugary foods. Eat fewer cakes, biscuits and confectionery – they are often high in saturated fat and calories too
- Salt and salty foods. Around 75% of salt comes from processed foods, so cook using fresh ingredients when you can, and cut down on salty foods such as cured/smoked/processed meats; savoury snacks, bottled sauces and ready meals (check labels for salt/sodium content). Make 6g salt (2.4g sodium) your maximum each day. Too much salt can raise blood pressure in sensitive individuals

## FOOD SWOPS

### ✗ Less heart healthy foods

- ✗ Lard
- ✗ Butter, margarine
- ✗ White bread, pasta, rice
- ✗ Cornflakes
- ✗ Sweet biscuits, cake
- ✗ Chocolate, crisps
- ✗ Pastry
- ✗ Takeaways
- ✗ Sausages, burgers, fatty meat
- ✗ High fat cheese, cream and milk

### ✓ More heart healthy foods

- ✓ Olive, rapeseed and sunflower oils
- ✓ Olive oil and sunflower spreads
- ✓ Wholegrain breads, brown pastas, brown rice
- ✓ Porridge, oat based cereals, wheat biscuits, muesli
- ✓ Oatcakes, digestives
- ✓ Unsalted nuts, dried and fresh fruit
- ✓ Lentils, beans and peas
- ✓ Meals made from basic fresh ingredients
- ✓ Lean meat, seafood including oily fish
- ✓ Reduced fat dairy foods, soya products