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[Home](#) > The Traditional Mediterranean Diet

The Traditional Mediterranean Diet

The Mediterranean Diet describes a delicious way of eating and drinking that scientists, since the mid-20th century, have consistently reported promotes good health.

In 1993, Oldways and the Harvard School of Public Health teamed up to introduce the Mediterranean diet to an American audience. They organized a conference to present the strong science, and unveiled a graphic – the [Mediterranean Diet Pyramid](#) ^[1] – to make this approach easy to understand. This way of eating is now universally recognized as the "gold standard" for eating patterns that promote lifelong good health.

Traditional Mediterranean meals are based on plentiful fruits, vegetables, beans and legumes; an abundance of bread, pasta, rice, couscous, and other grain foods, especially whole grains; nuts; extra virgin olive oil; fish, poultry and lean red meat; cheese and yogurt; and moderate amounts of red wine. These are the foods and drinks traditionally consumed by people living in the countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea. This diet pattern is closely tied traditionally to areas of olive oil cultivation in the Mediterranean region. Given these carefully defined parameters of geography and time, the phrase "Traditional Mediterranean Diet" is used here as shorthand for the healthy traditional diets of these regions at that time.



To help people incorporate the Mediterranean Diet into their daily meals, Oldways and an international coalition of nutrition scientists and culinary experts developed the [Mediterranean Diet Pyramid](#) ^[2] to picture this delicious, healthy eating pattern in graphic form. This pyramid, created in light of current nutrition research and representing a healthy, traditional Mediterranean diet, is based on the dietary traditions of Crete, Greece and southern Italy circa 1960, at a time when the rates of chronic disease were among the lowest in the world, and adult life expectancy was among the highest, even though medical services were limited.

[Click here to see learn about the Mediterranean Diet Pyramid, as well as the recent redesign and updates made in 2009.](#) ^[2]

What Exactly Is The Traditional Mediterranean Diet All About?

Below is a summary of the characteristics of this eating pattern and lifestyle habits traditional to the Mediterranean, based on the scientific updates from the 15th Anniversary Mediterranean Conference:

	<p>1. Grains, vegetables, and fruits should be eaten at most meals, because they are important sources of vitamins, minerals, energy, antioxidants, and fiber. An eating pattern high in these foods promotes good health and weight control when consumed wisely.</p> <p>Grains. The majority of grains should be whole grains, such as wheat, oats, rice, rye, barley, and corn. These grains are best consumed in whole, minimally-processed forms, because refining and processing can remove many valuable nutrients, including vitamins, minerals, and fiber.</p> <p>Vegetables. Vegetables are an important staple of eating patterns of peoples in all the countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea, providing valuable nutrients and satiety. These benefits are amplified because the vegetables are normally cooked or drizzled with olive oil. Raw vegetables are also a healthy vegetable option.</p> <p>Fruits. Whole fresh fruit is ever-present in the Mediterranean. No-sugar-added fruit juices provide only some of the same nutrition benefits as whole fruit, and attention to portion control and total calories is wise. Fruit "drinks" do not have the benefits of fruit juice.</p>
	<p>2. Olives and olive oil are central to the Mediterranean diet. Olives are universally eaten whole, and widely used for cooking and flavoring in the countries that border the Mediterranean Sea. Olive oil is the principal source of dietary fat used for cooking, baking, and for dressing salads and vegetables. Extra virgin olive oil is highest in health-promoting fats, phytonutrients and other important micronutrients.</p>
	<p>3. Nuts, beans, legumes and seeds are good sources of healthy fats, protein, and fiber. They add flavor and texture to Mediterranean dishes.</p>
	<p>4. Herbs and spices add flavors and aromas to foods, reducing the need to add salt or fat when cooking. They are also rich in a broad range of health-promoting antioxidants, and are used liberally in Mediterranean cuisines. Herbs and spices also contribute to the national identities of the various Mediterranean cuisines.</p>
	<p>5. Cheese and yogurt are eaten regularly in the traditional Mediterranean diet, but in low to moderate amounts. The calcium in cheese and yogurt is important for bone and heart health. Low fat and nonfat dairy products ease concerns of adverse consequences of somewhat higher consumption of dairy products.</p>
	<p>6. Fish and shellfish are important sources of healthy protein for Mediterranean populations. Fish such as tuna, herring, sardines, salmon and bream are rich in essential heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids, and shellfish and crustaceans including mussels, clams and shrimp have similar benefits. Fish and shellfish are not typically battered and fried in Mediterranean countries.</p>
	<p>7. Eggs are a good source of high-quality protein, and can be especially beneficial for individuals who do not eat meat. Eggs are regularly used in baking in Mediterranean countries.</p>
	<p>8. Meats are eaten in small portions by Mediterranean peoples, who prefer lean cuts. Poultry is a good source of lean protein without the high levels of saturated fat found in some cuts of red meat. With ground meats, 90 percent lean/10 percent fat is a sound choice.</p>
	<p>9. Sweets are consumed in small portions in the Mediterranean. Fruits are ever-present on Mediterranean tables, and are a normal way to end a meal. Gelato and sorbet are consumed a few times a week, in small portions.</p>
	<p>10. Wine is consumed regularly but moderately in the Mediterranean, unless discouraged by religious beliefs. "Moderately" means up to one five-ounce glass of</p>

	<p>wine per day for women and up to two five- ounce glasses for men. Individuals should only drink wine if they are medically able to do so, and should ask their doctors for more information.</p>
	<p>11. Water is essential for life, and proper hydration during each day makes a positive contribution to health, well being and energy levels. Individual variations in body sizes, metabolic rates and activity levels mean that some people should drink more water every day than others.</p>
	<p>12. Portion size. Because foods in the bottom section of the pyramid may be eaten in larger amounts and more frequently, portion sizes and frequency of consumption decline in the pyramid's upper sections.</p>
	<p>13. Moderation is a wise approach. A balanced and healthy diet accommodates most foods and drinks, so long as moderation and wise choices are the key characteristics. For example, enjoying a small piece of birthday cake, savoring a few slices of grilled steak, or relaxing with family and friends with a glass or two of wine or beer are important aspects of being human. As always, moderation is the wise watchword.</p>
	<p>14. Healthy lifestyle habits. Daily physical activity is important for overall good health. This includes strenuous exercise like running and aerobics, as well as more leisurely activities such as walking and housework or yard-work, or taking the stairs instead of the elevator.</p>
	<p>15. Meals in the company of others. The Mediterranean Diet is grounded on the principles of enjoyment and pleasure. Foods, drinks and meals are best eaten with others, when possible, and savored.</p>
	<p>16. Weight control is very important for good health. Establish your healthy weight range from your doctor or from reputable web sites, and let this healthy weight range be your guide. If you are above this range, cut back on the food and drink you consume, add more exercise, or both. For most people, counting calories obsessively not only detracts from enjoying foods, drinks, and meals, but also doesn't work very well in the long term.</p>
	<p>17. Applicability of these guidelines. These recommendations and the updated Mediterranean Diet Pyramid are reliable for most adults. However, children and pregnant women and others with special dietary needs may require dietary supplementation. These needs can be accommodated within the Mediterranean Diet in most circumstances.</p>

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[2] <http://oldwayspt.org/mediterranean-diet-pyramid>