

SIGN OF THE TIMES

The Mediterranean Diet Translated For Real Life

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The Mediterranean diet. It sounds so exotic, so foreign. Time and again we recommend it to our patients but most simply translate the concept as more olive oil and fish. They might think of dishes like Greek salad, spanakopita, or even hummus—foods that really aren't all that familiar. Most Mediterranean diet cookbooks further this idea and are filled with recipes and ingredients that are not recognizable to most Americans.

Truthfully, the research simply looks at a style of eating and, while the ingredients are important, how they are put together can very easily be translated to "Western" tastes. The reality is that the Mediterranean-style diet is a basic set of principles that you can easily follow by making a few small adjustments in your regular diet.

The seminal work reported by Antonia Trichopoulou and colleagues in 2003 analyzed the diet of more than 22,000 Greeks and categorized it into nine basic components.¹ Those nine categories—vegetables, fruit and nuts, legumes, dairy, oils, cereals and grains, meats, fish, and alcohol—make up the 9-point Mediterranean diet score on which the research is based.

As such, a perfect Mediterranean diet score would be a 9 and the pure Western fast-food diet would likely come in at or near zero.

The study showed that even small differences—say a 2-point improvement from 5 to 7—had a profound effect, with a 25% reduction in mortality from vascular disease and cancers. Since then there have been supporting studies using and expanding on this format, but the 9-point scale is a simple and easy way to approach eating healthier and

helping our patients understand what really works.

What's your Mediterranean diet score? This quiz will help you understand those guidelines and show you the small changes you can make in your daily life to improve your health.

If you are female, do you eat more than 9 ounces of vegetables per day (11 ounces for men)?

4 ounces is...

- about 2 medium carrots
- about 8 medium spears of asparagus
- about 1 cup sliced yellow squash or zucchini
- about one 3-inch beet
- about 1 1/4 cups chopped broccoli

Score:

1 point for more than 9 / 11 ounces
0 points for less than 9 / 11 ounces

Beyond Mediterranean diet research, other studies have shown that each additional serving of vegetables you eat per day reduces the risk of heart disease by 4%.²

Do you eat more than 1 3/4 ounces of legumes per day (2 ounces for men)?

1 3/4 ounces is...

- about 1/4 cup canned chick peas
- about 3 tablespoons peanut butter
- about 1/4 cup raw lentils
- about 1/3 cup canned kidney beans
- about 1/3 cup roasted soybeans
- about 2/3 cup frozen peas

Score:

1 point for more than 1 3/4 / 2 ounces
0 points for less than 1 3/4 / 2 ounces

Eating legumes doesn't mean just eating beans, however. Eating legumes means having a peanut butter sandwich, a side of black-eyed peas, or some chili.

Do you eat more than 8 ounces of fruit or nuts per day (9 ounces for men)?

8 ounces is...

- 1 large apple
- 2 medium bananas
- 1 cup walnuts, pecans, pistachios, or other nuts

Score:

1 point for more than 8 / 9 ounces
0 points for less than 8 / 9 ounces

We know that most people are either sweet snackers or salty/savory snackers. This is pretty simple, and both are the perfect snack food—fruit if you like sweets and nuts if you are a savory/salty snacker.

Do you eat less than 7 ounces of dairy per day (7 1/4 ounces for men)?

7 ounces is...

- about a cup of yogurt
- about a cup of sour cream
- 7 slices of cheese

Score:

1 point for less than 7 / 7 1/4 ounces
0 points for more than 7 / 7 1/4 ounces

Contrary to some of the hype and many of the USDA nutrition recommendations, studies have shown that eating more dairy products is not the perfect solution for weight control or weight loss. That said, consuming fermented dairy products, like cheese and yogurt, appears to be beneficial.

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Do you eat more than 9 ounces (4.5 servings) of cereals or grains per day (10 1/2 ounces, or about 5 servings, for men)?

2 ounces (one serving) is...

- about 1 cup bite size shredded wheat
- two slices of whole wheat bread
- 1/4 cup of brown rice
- 1/2 cup dry whole wheat pasta
- 1/3 cup uncooked quinoa

Score:

1 point for more than 9 / 10 1/2 ounces

0 points for less than 9 / 10 1/2 ounces

Whole grains are great. There are many studies that show the benefits of whole grains. Good quality cereals and grains have been shown to help with lowering cholesterol, controlling diabetes and high blood pressure, and—best of all—weight control. The best part is that it doesn't take much. Changing as little as 2 slices of whole wheat bread for white bread is enough to have a significant reduction in the risk of heart disease.³

Start the day with a great quality cereal or oatmeal, take a sandwich with whole grain bread for lunch, and choose brown rice instead of white rice. Simple changes are the easiest.

Do you eat more than 3/4 ounces of fish per day (1 ounces for men)?

This is not much fish, and the research looked at averages, so that's why it seems to be so little. This really means about two or more 4 ounce servings per week.

Score:

1 point for more than 3/4 / 1 ounces per day

0 points for less than 3/4 / 1 ounces per day

There are a lot of reasons why consuming fish is good for you.

Fatty fish like salmon, tuna, halibut, grouper, and sardines are high in Omega-3 fats and have clearly been linked to lower rates of heart disease, stroke, and high blood pressure.

Do you eat less than 3 1/4 ounces of meat per day (4 ounces for men)?

Most people think that a serving of meat is much larger than it should be. Four ounces of beef, chicken, pork, or lamb is about the size of a deck of cards. Take time to look at the package, or better yet ask the butcher to cut your choices to the right portion size.¹

Choose lean meats whenever possible. Avoid processed meats like hot dogs, bologna, and sausage.

Score:

1 point for less than 3 1/4 / 4 ounces

0 points for more than 3 1/4 / 4 ounces

We now know that problem isn't as much eating red meat at all but an issue of the quality of meat you choose. Select lean fresh meats and avoid or minimize highly processed meats such as hot dogs, bologna, and sausages.⁴

Do you drink between 5 and 25 grams of alcohol per day (10 and 50 grams for men)?

25 grams is the equivalent of about one drink:

- One 12-ounce beer
- One 5-ounce glass of wine
- One 1-ounce shot of spirits

Score:

1 point for between 5 and 25 / 10 and 50 grams

0 points for less than 5 / 10 grams

0 points for more than 25 / 50 grams

Moderation is key. Drinking alcohol has been shown to be benefi-

cial, but too much is clearly a problem. In Mediterranean diet studies, most alcohol consumed is at meal times. It is clear that binge drinking is a major problem, so saving all of your drinks up for Saturday night isn't a good idea.

The ratio of the type of fat you consume is important. Do you eat more healthy oils? The optimal ratio is 1.6 portions of healthy fat to 1 portion of less healthy fats per day.

Healthy fats include:

- Olive oil
- Canola oil
- Grapeseed oil
- Peanut oil
- Soybean oil

Less healthy fats include:

- Hydrogenated vegetable oil
- Stick or hard margarines
- Lard
- Vegetable shortening
- Butter (in excess)

Score:

1 point for greater than the optimum ratio of 1.6 to 1 for healthy fats:less healthy fats

0 points for less than the optimum ratio of 1.6 to 1 for healthy fats:less healthy fats

So the key is good quality fats. In Mediterranean diet studies it's clear that the main fat used is olive oil.

Using olive oils in cooking is well documented to be good for you, and it doesn't take much to see that benefit in your health. Fill your cupboard with really great quality fats like olive and canola oil. Use butter sparingly for flavor and texture.

Scoring

There is no passing or failing grade for this test. The higher your score is, the better. A perfect Mediterranean-style diet would be a score

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of 9, and if you're living off snack food and soda, it's likely your score will be closer to zero.

The American Kitchen?

The Mediterranean diet is the American diet. Careful choice of ingredients—more plant-based foods,

including whole grains and legumes; high-quality fats; more fish; limited lean meat and dairy; and moderate alcohol consumption—is the key.

Links

1. <http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMoa025039>
2. <http://jn.nutrition.org/content/136/10/2588.abstract>
3. <http://jama.amaassn.org/content/289/13/1659.abstract>
4. <http://circ.ahajournals.org/cgi/content/abstract/CIRCULATIONHA.109.924977v1>

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