

The Mediterranean diet

Whiringa kai whakatautika

The Mediterranean diet is a way of eating that's based on traditional foods eaten in countries around the Mediterranean Sea.

People following the Mediterranean diet are more likely to live longer. They're also less likely to die from heart disease, stroke or cancer. The Mediterranean diet may prevent or reduce symptoms of diabetes, glaucoma, arthritis, Parkinson disease, menopause, depression and dementia.



The diet varies in different Mediterranean regions. Usually, it's rich in vegetables, fruits, legumes, nuts, wholegrains, fish and healthy fats. It includes small amounts of red meat and low-fat milk products. The Mediterranean diet also focuses on a healthy lifestyle or pattern. This means keeping active, getting plenty of rest and sharing meals with whānau (family) and friends.

Tips for following a Mediterranean diet

Eat plenty of plant foods

Have at least five servings of vegetables and two servings of fruit every day. A serving is about a handful. Include at least one serving of raw vegetables every day. Eat a variety of different coloured and textured fruits and vegetables.

Include wholegrains with every meal. Wholegrains include wholegrain bread, rolled oats, brown rice, wholemeal pasta and grains such as quinoa, millet, barley and buckwheat.

Have legumes such as lentils, chickpeas, black beans or kidney beans in a couple of meals every week. The Heart Foundation's Full O'Beans cookbook has information and recipes for legumes. Go to www.heartfoundation.org.nz and search for "full o'beans".

Choose low-fat milk and milk products

Use low-fat milk (green or yellow top) instead of whole milk (dark blue top) and use yoghurt instead of ice cream. Choose low-fat yoghurt and cheese such as Edam, feta and cottage cheese. Eat fermented milk products like live yoghurt and kefir regularly if you enjoy them.



Eat fish and seafood regularly

Eat fish or other seafood such as mussels twice a week. Choose oily fish such as salmon, sardines, mackerel and tuna often. Fresh fish and canned fish are both healthy choices. Avoid fried fish. Use healthy cooking methods such as grilling, steaming or lightly pan-frying in a little olive or canola oil.

Have lean white meat and eggs

Have skinless chicken at least twice a week. Eat up to four eggs every week.

Limit red meat and processed meat

Don't eat more than two servings of red meat and one serving of processed meat a week. A serving is the size and thickness of the palm of your hand (about 100 grams cooked). Processed meats include bacon, ham, salami and corned beef (or silverside).

Eat olives, unsalted nuts and seeds every day

Have a small handful (30 grams) of nuts or seeds, unsalted and raw or roasted without added fat. Have them as a snack or add them to your breakfast cereal, salad or stir-fry. Add diced olives to salads, stews or sandwiches.

Swap butter for olive oil

Replace butter and margarine with olive oil or canola oil. Lightly spread the oil on wholegrain bread and use it in cooking and dressings. Extra virgin olive oil has more antioxidants than other types of olive oil. It's also the most flavourful.

Enjoy a little wine

You can drink wine but if you don't drink alcohol, you don't need to start. If you drink alcohol, have it with meals and follow national guidelines on how much to drink safely. For information about national guidelines, go to www.healthinfo.org.nz and search for "safe drinking".

Drink plenty of fluids

Drink at least eight cups of fluids a day. Water is best. Low- or reduced-fat milk (light-blue, green, or yellow top) and tea, herbal tea, and coffee with no sugar are also fine.

Flavour food without using salt

Use ground pepper, lemon juice, vinegar, fresh garlic, ginger, mustard, chilli or other herbs and spices to flavour your food.

Limit sugar and sugary foods

Choose foods that are naturally sweet and contain lots of nutrients, like fruit. Keep sugary foods and drinks as occasional treats.

Written by Masters of Dietetics student, University of Otago. Adapted by HealthInfo clinical advisers. Last reviewed March 2022.