



ORANGE PAPER

# MEDITERRANEAN DELIGHTS

BENEFITS OF THE MEDITERRANEAN DIET FOR OLDER ADULTS



# INTRODUCTION

Many of us watch our diets only when trying to lose weight or limit our intake of salt or sugar—but it's important to remember that making a healthy diet part of your lifestyle can boost many aspects of your health, from improving eyesight to reducing stress to decreasing risk of multiple chronic diseases.

Researchers noticed decades ago that people living in countries that border the Mediterranean Sea have fewer risk factors for coronary disease compared to people in the US and northern Europe. One of the reasons may be the traditional cuisines in the region. Experts agree that the Mediterranean diet is one of the healthiest eating patterns you can choose.

Mediterranean cuisine encompasses foods commonly prepared in countries around the Mediterranean Sea, including Italy, Greece, and Spain. Dishes in those regions are primarily plant-based, with an emphasis on fruits, vegetables, whole grains, beans, and nuts, with olive oil as the main source of fat. While moderate amounts of fish and poultry are part of the cuisine, highly processed foods, including white bread, deli meat, and sweets, are excluded.

## MEDITERRANEAN CUISINE BASICS



### PROTEINS

Replace red meat with lean proteins, including fish and poultry, as well as beans. Fatty fish like salmon and albacore tuna are rich in omega-3 fatty acids, which offer multiple benefits.



### PRODUCE

Eat fresh vegetables and fruits daily.



### FATS

Healthy fats are the foundation of this cuisine. Cook with olive oil rather than other oils and butter. Olive oil, as well as nuts and seeds, provides monounsaturated fat, which supports healthy cholesterol levels.



### DAIRY

Eat dairy products and eggs in moderation.

*You should always consult a physician before beginning any new dietary program.*

# WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Researchers around the world have found the Mediterranean diet to be beneficial for healthy aging. One study with more than 10,000 participants found that those who followed a Mediterranean diet were 46% more likely to age healthfully and not develop chronic diseases like diabetes, kidney disease, and cancer (Samieri et al., 2013).

Additional evidence-based benefits of following a Mediterranean diet include the following:

## INCREASED LONGEVITY

One study found that adherence to the Mediterranean diet was associated with a 23% lower risk of premature death, likely due to anti-inflammatory and antioxidant-rich properties of foods encouraged in the diet (Pant et al., 2023). In another study with more than 4,000 participants, researchers found that those who followed the Mediterranean diet had longer telomeres. Telomeres are the protective caps at the ends of chromosomes that shorten with each cell division. Longer telomeres are a longevity marker and have been linked to a lower biological age. Shorter telomeres are a marker of biological aging and an increased risk of age-related diseases (Crous-Bou et al., 2014).

## IMPROVED BONE HEALTH

The Mediterranean diet's emphasis on foods rich in calcium (i.e., broccoli), magnesium (i.e., avocado), and vitamin D (i.e., salmon) supports stronger bones. Consistent with this, one study found that individuals who adhered to the Mediterranean diet had a 21% decreased risk of a hip fracture (Malmir et al., 2017).

## IMPROVED MEMORY

Some research suggests that nutrients and food found in the Mediterranean diet might protect against cognitive decline, and for some individuals, benefits in memory have been found (Scarmeas et al., 2018). These benefits may be due to the diet's richness in brain-boosting nutrients like healthy fats and antioxidants, as well as its emphasis on anti-inflammatory foods such as olive oil and fish (Scarmeas et al., 2018).

## IMPROVED HEART HEALTH

A longitudinal study with nearly 26,000 participants found that those who followed the Mediterranean diet decreased their likelihood of developing cardiovascular disease (Ahmad et al., 2018). This is likely due to the diet's emphasis on monounsaturated fats and inclusion of omega-3 fatty acids, which reduce harmful cholesterol while increasing beneficial cholesterol (Ahmad et al., 2018).

**ONE STUDY FOUND THAT ADHERENCE TO THE MEDITERRANEAN DIET WAS ASSOCIATED WITH A 23% LOWER RISK OF PREMATURE DEATH.**

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Here are some ways to incorporate more Mediterranean foods into your meals:

1

## START GRADUALLY

Begin by adding one or two Mediterranean staples like olive oil, nuts, or fresh vegetables into your meals. Other staple ingredients for cooking include herbs and spices like oregano, basil, and rosemary. Some flavorful ingredients to incorporate are garlic and onions. For whole grains, try quinoa or farro.

2

## TRY TRADITIONAL MEDITERRANEAN DISHES

Start your day with Greek yogurt with honey and berries, or a vegetable omelet. For lunch, try a Greek salad

or some hummus with pita bread and vegetables. Finally, for dinner, you might try grilled fish and vegetables, such as bell peppers.

3

## EXPLORE NEW RECIPES

Visit your local library or bookstore to find cookbooks like *The Mediterranean Diet for Beginners* by Rockridge Press, or *The 30-Minute Mediterranean Cookbook* by Deanna Segrave-Daly and Serena Ball. There are also websites like Yummly or Tasty to help you find Mediterranean-inspired recipes.



## REFERENCES

- Ahmad, S., Moorthy, M. V., Demler, O. V., Hu, F. B., Ridker, P. M., Chasman, D. I., & Mora, S. (2018). Assessment of risk factors and biomarkers associated with risk of cardiovascular disease among women consuming a Mediterranean diet. *JAMA Network Open*, 1(8). <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2018.5708>
- Crous-Bou, M., Fung, T. T., Prescott, J., Julin, B., Du, M., Sun, Q., Rexrode, K. M., Hu, F. B., & De Vivo, I. (2014). Mediterranean diet and telomere length in nurses' health study: Population based cohort study. *BMJ*, 349(5). <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.g6674>
- Malmir, H., Saneei, P., Larijani, B., & Esmailzadeh, A. (2017). Adherence to Mediterranean diet in relation to bone mineral density and risk of fracture: A systematic review and meta-analysis of observational studies. *European Journal of Nutrition*, 57(6), 2147–2160. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00394-017-1490-3>
- Pant, A., Gribbin, S., McIntyre, D., Trivedi, R., Marschner, S., Laranjo, L., Mamas, M. A., Flood, V., Chow, C. K., & Zaman, S. (2023). Primary prevention of cardiovascular disease in women with a Mediterranean diet: Systematic review and meta-analysis. *Heart*, 109(16), 1208–1215. <https://doi.org/10.1136/heartjnl-2022-321930>
- Samieri, C., Sun, Q., Townsend, M. K., Chiuve, S. E., Okereke, O. I., Willett, W. C., Stampfer, M., & Grodstein, F. (2013). The association between dietary patterns at midlife and health in aging. *Annals of Internal Medicine*, 159(9), 584–591. <https://doi.org/10.7326/0003-4819-159-9-201311050-00004>
- Scarmeas, N., Anastasiou, C. A., & Yannakoulia, M. (2018). Nutrition and prevention of cognitive impairment. *The Lancet Neurology*, 17(11), 1006–1015. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s1474-4422\(18\)30338-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/s1474-4422(18)30338-7)

Staffed by a multidisciplinary team of researchers, Mather Institute is an award-winning resource for research and information about wellness, aging, trends in senior living, and successful industry innovations. The Institute conducts cutting-edge research, often in collaboration with leading universities, with the goal of informing, innovating, and inspiring. Mather Institute is part of Mather, an 80+-year-old not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating Ways to Age Well.<sup>SM</sup>

This Orange Paper was developed with contributions from Ajla Basic, PhD, PMP, Project Manager of Mather Institute.

(888) 722.6468 | [institute@mather.com](mailto:institute@mather.com) | [matherinstitute.com](http://matherinstitute.com)

