

The Miracle Diet

Scientists have long touted the benefits of the Mediterranean diet for heart health. But there's more and more evidence that the diet can keep you healthy in other ways, too. In just-released findings from the ongoing NIH/AARP Diet and Health Study, sticking to the eating patterns of Greece and southern Italy cuts the risk of death from all causes by 20 percent.

Here are the basics of the diet:

- Plenty of fruits and vegetables**, including dried beans, peas, and other legumes
- Nuts**, especially walnuts
- Healthy fats**, such as olive oil and canola oil
- Red wine** in moderation
- Fish** two to three times a week
- Whole grains** in bread, pasta, and rice dishes

And you don't have to throw out your favorite recipes to get the health benefits of this way of eating. Here are some easy and rewarding ways to add a Mediterranean touch to any meal.

BREAKFAST

Choose complex carbs

Making your daily cereal, bread, or baked good the whole-grain kind is great for your heart. And since whole wheat and oats retain their fiber-rich bran and germ, they safeguard against the insulin surges that refined carbohydrates cause. The result: In a Harvard study of 43,000 men, those who ate the most whole-grain foods cut their diabetes risk in half.

LUNCH

Lean toward green...

Leafy greens lower cardiovascular risk, and the more you eat, the lower your risk gets. They are also major cancer fighters—cutting both ovarian-cancer risk, in one study, and non-Hodgkin's-lymphoma risk, in another, by more than 40 percent. And the folate found in spinach, endive, and romaine can help your brain age gracefully; diets high in the B vitamin protected 50- to 85-year-old subjects against cognitive declines, in a study at Tufts University.

...and add more beans

People who eat legumes such as dried beans, peas, and lentils at least four times a week lower their heart disease risk by 22 percent, according to a Tulane University study. Legumes also

lower artery-clogging LDL (“bad”) cholesterol, and they don’t spur the blood sugar spikes that can take a toll on your heart over time and lead to diabetes.

DINNER

Go fish ...

Omega-3 fats in seafood are the newest nutrition all-stars. They protect against heart disease, and recent research has also linked them to lower rates of both depression and Alzheimer’s disease. And the fact that coastal-dwelling Greeks and Italians eat far more fish than red meat additionally earns them an anticancer edge: colorectal-cancer risk was 30 percent lower in people who ate the most seafood, notes a report in the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute*. Among people who ate the most red meat, risk increased by more than one third.

... and swap spices for salt

Traditional Mediterranean herbs such as sage and oregano help battle insulin resistance, a blunting of the body’s ability to balance blood sugar that can raise risks of heart disease and stroke by 28 and 64 percent, respectively. In a USDA experiment, researchers found that sage and oregano doubled insulin activity, while turmeric and cloves tripled it. (That’s good news for anyone trying to keep blood sugar stable—in other words, for anyone who wants to protect their health.) But cinnamon proved the top performer—and in a subsequent study, diabetics who ate one gram of cinnamon (less than half a teaspoon) per day for 40 days lowered their fasting blood sugar by 18 percent and their LDL by 7 percent.

DESSERT

Try different kinds of fruit

Regional treats such as figs and dates are top sources of fiber and potassium, a mineral that plays a key role in blood pressure control. And since their antioxidant content is up to 50 times higher than that of other fruit, they are an absolute feast for the eyes: eating three or more servings of high-antioxidant fruit a day lowers the risk of sight-robbing ARM (age-related maculopathy) by 36 percent in people 50 and up, a Harvard study showed.

□ SNACK

Nibble on nuts

Almonds and pistachios have impressive cholesterol-lowering powers: in separate studies at the University of Toronto and Penn State University, eating two handfuls a day dropped subjects’ evil

LDL by 9.4 and 11.6 percent, respectively. And nuts' satisfying nature protects against added pounds—according to a recently published study in the journal *Obesity*, Mediterraneans who ate nuts at least twice a week were 31 percent less likely to gain weight than those who rarely or never ate them.

Rules to Live (Longer) By

These guidelines will make your current diet more heart-healthy

- **Force fruit** Include at least one serving at breakfast, another as a snack between meals, then pair more fruit with cheese or yogurt for dessert.
- **Mix your veggies** Instead of one or two side veggies, try a salad of mixed greens or a soup that blends many vegetables and beans.
- **Minimize red meat** Substitute fish or chicken whenever you can, and when you do eat beef, mix it with whole grains and veggies in stews, stuffed tomatoes, and similar dishes.
- **Substitute fats** Use olive oil in place of other oils and fats (including butter and margarine) at every opportunity. In the traditional Cretan diet, this heart-healthy oil accounted for up to one third of islanders' daily calories!

Like a Virgin

Not all olive oil is created equal

Olive oil is a rich source of monounsaturated fats—the kind that offset arterial sludge by keeping HDL (“good”) cholesterol high and LDL (“bad”) cholesterol low. And new research reveals that extra-virgin oil—the oil that comes from an olive’s first pressing—can keep your pipes clear of clots, as well, thanks to plant compounds called phenols. People who ate extra-virgin olive oil, which is higher in phenols, had lower levels of clot-promoting substances in their blood than those who ate a nonvirgin olive oil. When you shop, be sure to look for a brand that reads “extra-virgin” on the label; it’s the only type that’s entirely unrefined.

Fruit of the Vine

What if you don’t drink?

Sipping red wine has long been linked to lower heart-disease risk, but an alcoholic drink isn’t the only way to get that benefit. Purple grape juice proved just as effective at lowering total and LDL cholesterol, in animal experiments conducted at the University of Scranton in Pennsylvania. What’s more, scientists at Université Louis Pasteur de Strasbourg in France recently found that purple grape juice mimicks red wine’s ability to stimulate nitric oxide production in arterial cells. Nitric oxide is a natural chemical that keeps blood vessels elastic.

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Courtesy: AARP