

Mediterranean Diet

A practical guide to understanding the Mediterranean style of eating

This guide is about understanding, not prescribing. The Mediterranean diet is best thought of as a flexible eating pattern rather than a strict set of rules. It draws on traditional food patterns from countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea and places an emphasis on variety, minimally processed foods and enjoyment of food.

What does a Mediterranean diet usually include?

The pattern is generally rich in vegetables, fruit, beans and other pulses, wholegrains, nuts, seeds and olive oil. Fish and seafood are commonly included, alongside moderate amounts of eggs, poultry and dairy foods such as yoghurt and cheese. Red and processed meats, foods high in saturated fat, highly processed foods, added sugars and excess salt tend to feature less often.

It is a pattern, not a perfect menu

There is no single Mediterranean diet. Eating traditions vary considerably between Greece, Italy, Spain and other Mediterranean regions. A Mediterranean-style approach can also be adapted to foods, cultures, budgets, allergies, sensory preferences and family routines outside the Mediterranean.

Why has it received so much attention?

Mediterranean-style eating is one of the dietary patterns most consistently associated with cardiovascular health. Its overall pattern naturally tends to provide fibre, unsaturated fats and a wide range of plant foods. The British Heart Foundation identifies Mediterranean and DASH patterns as two well-researched approaches linked with better heart health.

A healthy diet still needs to work for the individual. The World Health Organization describes adequacy, balance, moderation and diversity as core principles of healthy eating; individual needs and cultural context matter.

Building the Mediterranean Pattern

Vegetables and fruit

Vegetables are a major part of the pattern. Rather than treating them as a small side dish, they can form a substantial part of meals. Fresh, frozen and tinned options can all be useful. Fruit can be included according to preference and individual needs.

Wholegrains and starchy foods

Wholegrain bread, oats, brown rice, wholewheat pasta, barley and other grains can contribute fibre, vitamins and minerals. There is no requirement to use unfamiliar foods: everyday wholegrain choices can fit the pattern.

Beans, lentils and other pulses

Pulses are inexpensive sources of plant protein and fibre. Chickpeas, lentils, kidney beans, butter beans and similar foods can be added to soups, salads, stews and sauces or used to replace some meat.

Fats

Olive oil is traditionally the main added fat. Nuts, seeds and oily fish also provide unsaturated fats. This does not mean that unlimited amounts are needed; the emphasis is on replacing sources of saturated fat with unsaturated alternatives where appropriate.

Fish, meat, eggs and dairy

Fish - including oily fish - commonly features in Mediterranean-style eating. Eggs, poultry, yoghurt and cheese can also be included. Red and processed meat is generally eaten less frequently than in many Western dietary patterns.

Flavour

Herbs, spices, garlic and other flavourings can make meals enjoyable while reducing reliance on excess salt. Food does not need to be bland to be nutritious.

Important: Alcohol is not required to follow a Mediterranean diet. Someone who does not drink alcohol does not need to start for health reasons.

Potential Benefits - and Keeping Claims Realistic

Heart and circulatory health

The strongest public-health messaging around Mediterranean-style eating concerns heart health. The British Heart Foundation notes that Mediterranean-style eating is associated with reduced risk of heart and circulatory disease, and highlights its emphasis on fruit and vegetables, pulses, fish, nuts, seeds and unsaturated fats.

Fibre and plant variety

Wholegrains, vegetables, fruit, beans, nuts and seeds can increase dietary fibre. Fibre supports normal bowel function and can contribute to healthier cholesterol levels. A varied plant intake also supplies vitamins, minerals and naturally occurring plant compounds.

A less restrictive framework

For some people, the flexibility of Mediterranean-style eating is an advantage. It focuses more on the overall pattern than on banning entire food groups or counting every gram of a nutrient.

What it cannot promise

No dietary pattern can guarantee weight loss, prevent every illness or replace medical treatment. Health outcomes are influenced by many factors, including genetics, sleep, activity, smoking, medication, access to food, stress and existing health conditions.

A note about weight

The Mediterranean diet does not have to be approached as a weight-loss diet. Someone can improve the nutritional quality and variety of their eating without making body weight the central goal.

Be cautious of social-media claims that turn Mediterranean eating into a rigid 'clean eating' plan. A sustainable dietary pattern should leave room for real life, preferences, culture and pleasure.

What Might a Day Look Like?

Breakfast ideas

Porridge topped with berries and seeds; wholegrain toast with eggs and tomatoes; or yoghurt with fruit, oats and chopped nuts. These are examples, not rules.

Lunch ideas

A bean and vegetable soup with wholegrain bread; a chickpea, cucumber and grain salad; or a wholegrain wrap containing vegetables and a protein source.

Evening meal ideas

Fish with potatoes and vegetables; lentil and vegetable stew; wholewheat pasta with vegetables, beans and olive oil; or chicken with grains, salad and yoghurt-based accompaniment.

Snacks, if wanted or needed

Fruit, yoghurt, a small handful of nuts, wholegrain crackers with hummus, or another familiar food that works for you.

A gentle way to begin

Instead of...	You might try...
Changing everything at once	Choose one meal or one food swap first
Removing all fats	Use more unsaturated fats such as olive or rapeseed oil
Making meat the centre of every meal	Try beans, lentils or fish in some meals
Buying only fresh produce	Use frozen or tinned vegetables when practical
Trying to eat 'perfectly'	Think about the overall pattern across days and weeks

When Extra Care Is Needed

Allergies, intolerances and coeliac disease

A Mediterranean pattern contains many foods, but none of them has to be forced into an individual's diet. Allergies and medically necessary exclusions must come first. Gluten-free grains, dairy alternatives and other substitutions can be used where appropriate.

Sensory differences, ARFID and eating disorders

A highly varied plate can be unrealistic or distressing for someone with sensory sensitivities, ARFID or another eating disorder. In these situations, increasing variety may need to happen slowly - or may not be the immediate priority. Adequate and safe nourishment is more important than trying to achieve an idealised food pattern.

Medical conditions and medication

People with diabetes, kidney disease, gastrointestinal conditions, swallowing difficulties, significant food allergies or other medical needs may require individual advice. NHS guidance also recommends discussing substantial dietary changes with the healthcare team when medication may need adjustment.

Cost and accessibility

Mediterranean-style eating does not require premium ingredients. Tinned beans, frozen vegetables, tinned fish, oats and supermarket own-brand wholegrains can all contribute. Expensive 'Mediterranean' products are not necessary.

When to seek professional support

A registered dietitian or appropriate healthcare professional can help if eating has become very restricted, food is causing significant anxiety, weight is changing unexpectedly, symptoms persist, or a medical condition affects nutritional needs.

The aim is not to make food another source of pressure. A dietary pattern is only useful when it is safe, accessible and workable for the person living with it.

Reflection, Practical Check-In & Sources

A gentle nutrition check-in

- Which foods in this pattern do I already enjoy or tolerate?
- Is there one vegetable, pulse, wholegrain or unsaturated-fat choice I could add - rather than focusing on restriction?
- What gets in the way: cost, time, sensory needs, cooking confidence, symptoms or something else?
- Would changing one meal feel more manageable than changing an entire diet?
- Am I using food rules in a way that is increasing guilt, fear or anxiety?

A message from Space to Breathe Therapy

Nutrition information can easily become another set of rules telling us what we 'should' do. It does not have to be that way. You are allowed to approach food gradually, adapt ideas to your own needs and keep the foods that help you feel safe and nourished. The Mediterranean pattern can offer useful principles, but you do not need to eat perfectly to look after yourself.

Evidence and further reading

World Health Organization (2026), Healthy diet. WHO describes healthy diets as being grounded in adequacy, balance, moderation and diversity, while recognising that individual and cultural needs vary.

World Health Organization & FAO (2024), What are healthy diets? Joint principles for healthy dietary patterns.

British Heart Foundation, heart-healthy eating guidance. BHF identifies Mediterranean-style eating as a well-researched dietary pattern associated with heart and circulatory health.

NHS / MyHealthLondon, Mediterranean eating plan. Overview of the pattern, its food groups and the importance of [individual healthcare advice where medication or cardiovascular risk is involved](#).

Educational information only. This guide is not a diagnosis, individual diet prescription or substitute for advice from a GP, registered dietitian or other qualified healthcare professional.