

What Diet Should You Follow?

There are two reasons to consider modifying your current eating practices: you are overweight or you are concerned about developing cardiovascular disease.

Chances are you have been exposed to multiple competing and seemingly contradictory dietary plans over the years. Choices range from virtually vegan, ultra low fat diets (Ornish or Pritikin) to ultra low carb, high fat (Atkins/South Beach).

All of these dietary approaches are successful to a varying extent in achieving weight loss in the short term.

However, what we should be most interested in is a diet that we can follow long term and which has been clearly shown to reduce risk of cardiovascular and other chronic diseases. Preferably, to promote long term satisfaction such a diet accomplishes these goals without sacrificing our ability to enjoy the wonderful diversity of the plant and animal kingdom available for the omnivore's consumption.

Neither the ultra low fat nor the ultra low carb diets have reliable long term data showing a reduction in heart disease with diet alone.

However, the Mediterranean diet (with my suggested modifications) has the best evidence for reducing risk of cardiovascular disease and allows one to choose from a broad palette of foods.

Dr. Pearson's Modifications of Mediterranean Diet

I have written extensively on my blog at www.theskepticalcardiologist.com on the following topics. I recommend you sign up to follow my posts which happen about once a week. If you go to the URL address above you can either search for topics of interest or click on categories related to diet and cardiovascular disease. to find the relevant posts.

Dairy Fat Is OK

There is no evidence that consuming low fat dairy products is healthier than high fat dairy. Multiple studies show that consumption of full fat dairy actually reduces your risk of vascular disease (heart attack and stroke). There is no reason to drastically cut your usage of butter or milk based on these studies. Yogurt (full fat) and cheese seem to be especially beneficial for reducing vascular risk. What tends to happen when dairy products are processed and marketed after removal of the natural healthy dairy fat is the addition of synthetic additives and sugar.

Fat Doesn't Make You Fat or Cause Heart Disease

The evidence that fat in general is bad for heart health is nonexistent. The fat/ heart health relationship is very complex. National guidelines were issued before there was evidence to support reducing fat in the diet. Now recommendations are to reduce saturated fat (the kind mostly found in animal fat and dairy fat) however there are

good saturated fats and bad saturated and even this recommendation is not well supported by scientific data.

Sugar Is The Major Toxin in Most People's Diets, Not Fat

Sugar and refined carbohydrates should be eliminated or minimized in the diet. Pay attention to how much added sugar is in what you eat and avoid it.

Avoid sugar-sweetened beverages (soda, energy drinks, juices) and drink water if you are thirsty.

The major sources of refined carbohydrates in the American diet are white bread, pasta and potatoes. These are often the comfort foods we crave when we're feeling down or stressed: pasta, fries, white bread, cookies, pastries, ice cream, cakes.

In general, I would advise a diet that is more low carbohydrate than low fat but either approach works if you eliminate most or all refined carbohydrates and added sugar.

Eat Real Food, Avoid Processed and Ultra-Processed Foods

Michael Pollan has a great book that I recommend entitled "Food Rules". His basic tenet is "Eat FOOD, Mostly Plants, Not too much". Thus food means real food, not highly processed food-like substances which contain multiple ingredients and preservatives. Plant-based foods, vegetables, fruit, legumes, nuts are very nutrient dense and every study seems to agree that the more of these you can consume the better.

Savor Food and Try to Cook It Yourself As Much As Possible

Cut back on portion sizes. Stop eating when you are satisfied, not when you are stuffed or full. Eat slowly, eat with family and friends and savor the food.

Two Things I Recommend Because They Make Sense

As much as possible eat food that is grown and produced locally and in season. The farther and longer food travels, the more it has to be modified to extend storage life.

Cows that are allowed to graze in natural grass pastures provide healthier milk and beef compared to those raised on a factory farm and fed corn.

Exercise, Move, and Stand. Avoid Sitting For Long Periods.

Please see my exercise sheet for details of recommendations

Finally, as we age it becomes necessary to incorporate some element of regular aerobic exercise into our daily lives in order to keep at an acceptable weight. I advise aerobic exercise (jogging, running, treadmill, bicycle, walking very rapidly) to the point of being breathless and preferably getting the heart rate up to 85% of your predicted maximal heart rate (220 minus your age) for 30-40 minutes 3-4 times per week.

For optimal weight management some form of weight training or isometric exercise is optimal. There are only two lifestyle changes that we know of that raise the good (HDL) cholesterol, the one that removes cholesterol from the lining of the arteries-exercise and alcohol. Regular exercise also improves mood, prolongs mental functioning and strengthens bones.

Key components of the Mediterranean diet

The Mediterranean diet emphasizes:

1. Getting plenty of exercise
2. Eating primarily plant-based foods, such as fruits and vegetables, whole grains, legumes and nuts
3. Using herbs and spices instead of salt to flavor foods
4. Eating fish and poultry at least twice a week
5. Drinking red wine in moderation (optional)

The diet also recognizes the importance of enjoying meals with family and friends.

Fruits, vegetables, nuts and grains

The Mediterranean diet traditionally includes fruits, vegetables, pasta and rice. For example, residents of Greece eat an average of nine servings a day of antioxidant-rich fruits and vegetables. The Mediterranean diet has been associated with a lower level of oxidized low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol – the "bad" cholesterol that's more likely to build up deposits in your arteries.

Nuts are another part of a healthy Mediterranean diet. Nuts are high in fat (approximately 80 percent of their calories come from fat), but most of the fat is not saturated. Avoid candied or honey-roasted and heavily salted nuts.

Grains in the Mediterranean region are typically whole grain and usually contain very few unhealthy trans fats, and bread is an important part of the diet there. s.

Healthy fats

The Mediterranean diet features olive oil as the primary source of fat. Olive oil provides monounsaturated fat – a type of fat that can help reduce LDL cholesterol levels when used in place of saturated or trans fats. "Extra-virgin" and "virgin" olive oils – the least processed forms – also contain the highest levels of the protective plant compounds that provide antioxidant effects.

Monounsaturated fats and polyunsaturated fats, such as canola oil and some nuts, contain the beneficial linolenic acid (a type of omega-3 fatty acid). Omega-3 fatty acids lower triglycerides, decrease blood clotting, are associated with decreased sudden heart attack, improve the health of your blood vessels, and help moderate blood pressure. Fatty fish – such as mackerel, lake trout, herring, sardines, albacore tuna and salmon – are rich sources of omega-3 fatty acids. Fish is eaten on a regular basis in the Mediterranean diet.

Wine

The health effects of alcohol have been debated for many years, and some doctors are reluctant to encourage alcohol consumption because of the health consequences of excessive drinking. However, alcohol – in moderation – has been associated with a reduced risk of heart disease in some research studies.

The Mediterranean diet typically includes a moderate amount of wine. This means no more than 5 ounces (148 milliliters) of wine daily for women (or men over age 65), and no more than 10 ounces (296 milliliters) of wine daily for men under age 65. More than this may increase the risk of health problems, including increased risk of certain types of cancer.

If you're unable to limit your alcohol intake to the amounts defined above, if you have a personal or family history of alcohol abuse, or if you have heart or liver disease, refrain from drinking wine or any other alcohol. Also keep in mind that red wine may trigger migraines in some people.

Putting it all together

The Mediterranean diet is a delicious and healthy way to eat. Many people who switch to this style of eating say they'll never eat any other way. Here are some specific steps to get you started:

1. Eat your veggies and fruits – and switch to whole grains. An abundance and variety of plant foods should make up the majority of your meals. They should be minimally processed, and try to purchase them when they're in season. Strive for seven to 10 servings a day of veggies and fruits. Switch to whole-grain bread and cereal, and begin to eat more whole-grain rice and pasta products. Keep baby carrots, apples and bananas on hand for

quick, satisfying snacks. Fruit salads are a wonderful way to eat a variety of healthy fruit.

2. Go nuts. Keep almonds, cashews, pistachios and walnuts on hand for a quick snack. Choose natural peanut butter, rather than the kind with hydrogenated fat added. Try tahini (blended sesame seeds) as a dip or spread for bread.
3. Spice it up. Herbs and spices make food tasty and are also rich in health-promoting substances. Season your meals with herbs and spices rather than salt.
4. Go fish. Eat fish once or twice a week. Fresh or water-packed tuna, salmon, trout, mackerel and herring are healthy choices. Grilled fish tastes good and requires little cleanup. Avoid fried fish, unless it's sauteed in a small amount of canola oil and uses Panko bread crumbs.
5. Raise a glass to healthy eating. If it's OK with your doctor, have a glass of wine at dinner. If you don't drink alcohol, you don't need to start. Drinking purple grape juice may be an alternative to wine.