Why you should follow the Mediterranean ‘diet’ – and how to do it

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No doubt you've heard about the Mediterranean diet. It's long been reported to be the optimal eating plan for preventing a wide range of diseases including heart disease, stroke, Type 2 diabetes, Alzheimer's disease and cancer.

If you're wondering, though, if trendy new diets such as the keto diet, for instance, are a newer, better option than the Mediterranean diet, the answer is a definitive no.

The latest resounding endorsement for the well-researched Mediterranean diet came from a panel of 25 esteemed researchers, doctors and dietitians who recently ranked it the best "overall" diet for 2018. (The low-carb, high-fat keto diet tied for last place as Best Diet Overall.)

The panel scrutinized 40 popular diets to determine the best in nine categories, including heart health, diabetes prevention and weight loss.

The Mediterranean diet received more than one accolade. It was also named the number one plant-based diet, the best diet for healthy eating, for heart disease and for diabetes, and the easiest diet to follow (there's no formal plan or tracking).

The diet is nutritionally complete, safe, helps promote weight loss and can prevent and manage heart disease and diabetes.

What does the Mediterranean diet look like?

The Mediterranean "diet" is an eating pattern traditionally followed by people living in countries that border the Mediterranean Sea including Italy, Spain, France, Greece, Turkey, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria and Libya.

Eating this way means including fruits and vegetables, whole grains, pulses (e.g., beans and lentils), nuts and seeds in your diet every day. The main source of fat is olive oil, high in monounsaturated fat and a good source of vitamin E and anti-inflammatory compounds.

Fish, poultry, eggs and dairy products (yogurt and cheese) are eaten several times a week, while small portions of red meat are limited to twice a week, at most. Sweets are enjoyed as occasional treats.

Researchers believe that it's the combined protective effect of the Mediterranean eating pattern that counts, not its individual foods.

Seven ways to "Mediterranean-ize" your diet

The following tips will help you add fresh flavours and tastes to your diet while increasing your intake of heart-healthy fats, fibre, antioxidants and protective phytochemicals.

Rethink meat. If you eat red meat (e.g., beef, pork, lamb), treat it as a condiment rather than the main attraction of a meal. Instead of a 10-ounce steak, enjoy three ounces of meat grilled with bell peppers, mushrooms and onion on a skewer or stir-fried with lots of vegetables.

Include fish, especially oily fish such as salmon, trout and sardines, in your diet at least twice a week. Eat chicken or turkey twice a week.

Increase plant-based meals. To reduce animal protein and saturated fat, plan at least four meatless meals each week.

Batch cook whole grains. Barley brown rice, bulgur, whole wheat couscous and farro add fibre, protein, B vitamins, minerals and phytochemicals to the Mediterranean diet.

Make a quick salad by mixing leftover cooked grains with roasted vegetables, lentils, fresh herbs and a vinaigrette. Or, toss leftover whole grain pasta with tuna, red kidney beans, chopped vegetables and dressing.

Eat vegetables with every meal. Aim for at least one serving (one-half cup raw or cooked or one cup of salad greens) at each meal, including breakfast.

Add baby spinach and mushrooms to an omelette, greens or pumpkin puree to your smoothie, and shredded carrot or zucchini to muffin and pancake batters.

Snack on fruit and nuts. Eat fresh fruit with a small handful of walnuts, pecans or pistachios for a midday snack. Or, top Greek yogurt with pomegranate seeds, toasted sliced almonds and a drizzle of honey.

Change your fats. Make olive oil your principal cooking fat. Swap olive oil for butter in baking; you'll need less oil than butter. If your recipe calls for one-quarter cup of butter, for instance, you'll need three tablespoons of oil.

Extra virgin olive oil has a smoke point of 410 degrees F, so it's suitable for sautéing and baking.

Add herbs and spices. Flavour grain dishes, salads, soups and dressings with fresh or dried herbs and spices instead of salt. You'll also add polyphenols, potent antioxidants thought to boost brainpower and guard against cancer, diabetes and heart disease.
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