

## Understanding the Mediterranean Diet

A recent article in Consumer Reports (Consumer Reports, December 2006) concludes that following a Mediterranean style of eating, or "Mediterranean Diet" as it's more commonly known, may help decrease certain health risks such as heart disease, Alzheimer's disease and cancer. Heart disease is the leading cause of death among men and women in developed countries while the risk of Alzheimer's disease has been increasing each year<sup>1 2</sup>. The article also explains that no one food, but rather a combination of different foods enjoyed through out the Mediterranean region appear to be responsible for these positive health outcomes.

First, it's important to understand the key elements of the Mediterranean Diet in order to include them in an everyday lifestyle. The Mediterranean Diet contains plenty of nutritional powerhouses such as fish, nuts, beans, fruits, vegetables, pasta, breads, rice and olive oil. These foods translate into a diet rich in lean protein, fiber, antioxidants, whole grains and healthy, unsaturated fats. This typifies how the people of Italy have eaten for ages; it's a healthy approach to eating rather than a specific diet.

By consuming fish, nuts and beans as the main sources of protein, you're decreasing your intake of red meats. Red meats, which are generally higher in fat, saturated fat and cholesterol, have been linked to various forms of cancer and heart disease.

The abundance of fruits and vegetables in the Mediterranean Diet provide ample antioxidants and phytochemicals that can boost immune health, reduce cancer risk and fight diseases.

In addition, by choosing whole grain forms of bread, pasta, rice, and cereal—you're increasing natural sources of fiber, minerals and vitamins needed for good health.

Olive oil, the cooking oil with the highest level of monounsaturated fatty acids, or "good" fats, is used abundantly in cooking, baking and marinating throughout the Mediterranean region. In fact, it's a daily staple of the Mediterranean Diet. When unsaturated fatty acids, such as monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fatty acids, are substituted for saturated fatty acids, the risk of heart disease can be reduced because they help decrease both total cholesterol and LDL "bad" cholesterol, while increasing HDL "good" cholesterol <sup>1 3</sup>.

Dietitians agree that eating a well-balanced diet, like the Mediterranean style of eating, offers long-term health benefits. No one food works wonders on its own. It's not only the combination of increasing nutrient packed foods but also the limitation of foods high in fat, saturated fat and cholesterol that promote health and wellness. Another key to remember is that this style of eating must become a way of life, not just a short-term "diet." By regularly consuming foods that are the foundation for the Mediterranean Diet, you're putting yourself on the road to a healthier you.

### Sources:

1Alzheimer's Association: [www.alz.org/overview.asp](http://www.alz.org/overview.asp)

2 Estruch, R, M.A., et al. The Effects of a Mediterranean Diet on Risk Factors for Heart Disease (Summaries for Patients). Ann Int Med 2006;145.

3 American Dietetic Association: [www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org)

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