

# The Mediterranean Diet—A Model for Americans

by Dr. Richard A. Saladino



*No matter where they live on our vast and wonderful planet, people are people. But of all humans' common biologic backbone, the peoples of the earth display a remarkable diversity of cultural norms.*

Language, religion, family structure, governance, music, dance, sports, and clothing are all subject to amazing cultural differences. The human diet is every bit as diverse as the other cultural traditions.

All people eat to live, but the foods they choose depend on complex interactions among climate, geography, national resources, religion, and tradition. Each culture has its signature dishes; for example: Asians are noted for noodles and soy; Italians for pasta and bread; Germans for meat and potatoes; French for wine and cheese; Latinos for corn, beans and rice, and (alas!) Americans for hamburgers and fries. As migration, travel, and the global economy shrink our world, dietary diversity has diminished. But before variety becomes the exception, Americans should consider adopting the best nutritional traditions from other cultures, not just for the occasional pleasure of ethnic dining, but as a healthful pattern for everyday life. And one of the best and most easily attained patterns is the Mediterranean diet.

## WHAT IS IT?

Although the Mediterranean Basin occupies only a small fraction of the earth, there is considerable dietary diversity within the region. When nutritionists speak of the traditional Mediterranean diet, though, they refer to centuries old dietary patterns that has flourished in Crete, various rural regions in the rest of Greece, and parts of southern Italy and France. And that pattern has ten characteristic features.

1. An abundance of vegetables, fruits, beans, nuts, seeds, and other plant foods.
2. An abundance of unrefined grains, such as whole-grain cereals and breads.
3. Olive oil as the major source of fat.
4. Fish in moderate to high amounts.
5. Fruits as the typical dessert, with sweets containing honey or sugar consumed several times a week.
6. Yogurt, cheese, and other dairy products consumed daily in low to moderate amounts.
7. Four or fewer eggs consumed per week.
8. Poultry consumed in moderate to large

amounts and red meat in low amounts.

9. A reliance on locally grown, fresh, minimally processed foods.

10. Alcohol consumed in moderate amounts, usually as wine with meals.

Although the farmers of Crete did not analyze the nutrients in their diets, modern scientists have run the numbers. The traditional Mediterranean diet is high in complex carbohydrates and fiber but low in simple sugars, moderate in unsaturated fat, moderate in proteins, and moderate in alcohol. It's also tasty—but does it work?

## STUDIES IN AMERICA

Harvard's Health Professionals Follow-up Study examined the effect of dietary patterns on the health of 44,875 men over an eight-year period. When the study began, all the men were 40 to 75 years of age and none had been diagnosed with cardiovascular disease or cancer. In addition to providing their medical histories and dietary information, the volunteers also disclosed details about their family medical histories, smoking, height, and weight. Then the researchers tracked the men to see if diet influenced the development of fatal and non-fatal heart disease and if that effect was independent of other heart disease risk factors. The scientists identified two overall dietary patterns. One was a typical American diet, characterized by a high consumption of red meat, processed meat, refined grains, French fries, whole-fat dairy products, sweets and desserts. The other pattern was a "Prudent" diet, high in fruits, vegetables, legumes, whole grains, fish, and poultry. This pattern was quite similar to the Mediterranean diet, though it featured less olive oil.

The volunteers' diets were scored accordingly to how closely they approached the American or prudent patterns. The results were striking: men with the most American Patterns were 64% more likely to develop heart disease than men with the most prudent diets. In a follow-up study, the prudent diet was also linked to a lower risk of type 2 diabetes. In both cases, these associations remained strong even after the scientists adjusted the findings for smoking, drinking, and obesity (more common in the men who followed the American pattern), as well as vitamin use and exercise (more prevalent with the prudent pattern).

Harvard University is fully coeducational, and its medical scientists study women as well as men. In recent reports from the Nurses' Health Study, women who followed the prudent dietary pattern enjoyed a 24% lower risk of coronary artery disease and a 26% lower risk of stroke than those who consumed Western-style foods. And when women combined regular exercise and prudent eating with other beneficial habits, they enjoyed a remarkable 83% reduction in the risk of heart disease. The Western diet

was also associated with a higher risk of colon cancer. What's good for Athens, Greece, seems to be good for Athens, Georgia.

## STATINS, DIET, OR BOTH?

Since so many excellent medications can lower your cholesterol and reduce your risk of heart disease, why not just take a statin pill and skip the fish, whole grains, and olive oil? The answer comes from scientists in Finland who compared the effects of diet, medication, and a combination of the two. The subjects were 120 men between the ages of 35 and 64; all the volunteers had high cholesterol levels. The effects of a modified Mediterranean diet were compared with those of a normal Finnish diet, the effects of 20mg Simvastatin (Zocor) were compared with those of a placebo, and the combination of diet and medication was tested against the other groups. The modified Mediterranean diet featured monounsaturated and omega-3 fatty acids and lots of fruits, vegetables, and dietary fiber. It worked, lowering total cholesterol by 21% and LDL cholesterol by 30%. But the combination was best of all, reducing LDL cholesterol by 41%. And the combination had other advantages. Diet alone had the unwanted effect of lowering HDL levels. Similarly, Simvastatin raised insulin levels by 13%, but the combination corrected that potentially harmful result. From the standpoint of cholesterol, the Mediterranean diet can boost the benefits of medication. And diet can do things that even the statin drugs cannot. It reduces the risk of hypertension, dia-

betes, and obesity. It may provide some protection against Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia. In addition, a diet high in fiber but low in red meat may reduce the risk of colon cancer. And men may stand to gain even more than women, since the same dietary pattern that provides all these gains also appears to reduce the risk of prostate cancer. Finally, there is a third benefit of the diet that no drug can match: it tastes so good!

## BEYOND DIET

The Mediterranean diet has three major advantages: it's healthy, it's enjoyable, and it's easy to modify and adapt to American tastes and menus. But while an excellent diet is necessary for excellent health, it is not enough; it should be matched by an excellent exercise schedule. In fact, both are intrinsic parts of the Mediterranean lifestyle. And just as the diet is moderate but healthful, so too is your exercise (such as walking) will do the trick as long as you do it nearly every day. The Mediterranean diet and exercise regimen are important, but they're not new. In fact, some 2,400 years ago, the Father of Medicine explained it all, "If we could give every individual the right amount of nourishment and exercise, not too little and not too much, we would have found the safest way to health." Can it be a coincidence that Hippocrates was Greek?

Dr. Richard A. Saladino received his Bachelor's Degree of Science in Biology and Chemistry from the State University of New York at Albany. He received his Doctorate from Palmer College of Chiropractic in Davenport, Iowa. He is Diplomate of the National Board of Chiropractic Examiners. He is a long-standing member of the Florida Chiropractic Association, and has been an active practicing Chiropractic physician since 1988. Dr. Saladino is now internationally recognized as a Chiropractic Expert by the American Board of Medical Examiners. He has lectured at many colleges and institutions, and would be happy to educate you with regards to any health matter in order to meet your needs.

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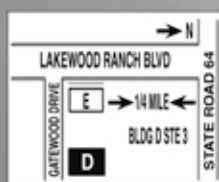


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