

The Mediterranean-style diet

The Mediterranean diet often receives media attention because of its potential to protect against cardiovascular disease and cancer. Enjoying a daily dose of red wine and a healthy splash of olive oil certainly sounds enticing! What does the Heart and Stroke Foundation SA have to say about the Mediterranean diet?

What is a Mediterranean-style diet?

The Mediterranean-style diet is an eating pattern that was typical of many regions in Greece and southern Italy in the early 1960's. Today, with westernisation as well as the vast differences in culture and eating habits, many of the countries in the Mediterranean region don't necessarily follow the traditional Mediterranean diet anymore. However, the typical Mediterranean-style eating pattern emphasises:

- Bread, pasta, cereals, potatoes, whole grains and other starchy foods
- Plenty of fruit and vegetables
- Legumes (beans, peas, lentils), nuts and seeds as a protein source
- Daily intake of olive oil as a good monounsaturated fat source
- Low to moderate amounts of dairy products, fish and poultry
- A maximum of 4 eggs per week
- Little red meat (monthly consumption only)
- Wine in low to moderate amounts

What do the researchers say?

Over the past few decades, numerous studies have provided evidence that Mediterranean-style diets may provide significant health benefits. Some of these studies are well designed, while others have limitations in their study methodology. In a meta-analysis published in the British Medical Journal in 2008, it was found that in people who adhered to a Mediterranean diet, there was significant reduction in overall mortality (9%), death as a result of cardiovascular disease (9%) incidence of cancer (6%) and incidence of Parkinson's and Alzheimer's disease (13%).

Looking at cardiovascular disease death rates from around the world: Russia, Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary have the highest rates, whereas some of the Mediterranean countries including: Israel, France, Spain and Italy have much lower rates. This may not necessarily be as a result of diet alone; other lifestyle factors (such as more physical activity, less stress) could also play a role.

What does the Heart & Stroke Foundation SA (HSFSA) recommend?

Overall, the Mediterranean-style diet encourages an eating pattern *similar* to the HSFSA's recommendations – especially reducing intake of saturated (bad) fats. However, they generally provide a high percentage of calories from fat (although most of these fats are the healthier monounsaturated fats). While healthier fats can help protect your heart, remember that ALL fats are high in calories. So if you are watching your weight, you should try to reduce your total fat intake.

More research is required to determine whether it is the Mediterranean diet itself or whether other lifestyle factors account for the cardio protective effect. To reduce your overall risk of cardiovascular disease, the HSFSA recommends a number of lifestyle changes including:

- quitting smoking
- exercising regularly
- keeping a healthy weight
- managing stress
- cutting down on alcohol

- following a healthy, balanced diet

Having regular checks and managing high blood pressure, diabetes and high cholesterol are also vital in reducing your risk.

For more information on general heart health and healthy eating plans, contact the Heart Mark Diet Line on 0860 223 222, email heart@heartfoundation.co.za or visit www.heartfoundation.co.za.

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