

Celebrate National Nutrition Month[®] by Filling Your Plate with Color the Mediterranean Way

By: Donna L. Hollinger MS, RD, LD

Picture a meal of tomatoes with garlic and basil sautéed in olive oil served over pasta, vibrant salad greens drizzled with olive oil vinaigrette, crusty bread and a glass of red wine. The flavors and aromas of the Mediterranean – as well as the colors -- engage our senses.

Much evidence points to the benefits of eating a wide array of plant foods in a spectrum of colors. For more than 50 years, scientists studying the Mediterranean eating pattern have supported it for its healthy outcomes. One recent review published in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition found a Mediterranean eating pattern to have a protective effect against chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, stroke, cancer, Parkinson's and Alzheimer's. Another review published in Diabetes Research and Clinical Practice found a Mediterranean eating style to be associated with reduced risk of type 2 diabetes.

Since more than 15 countries border the Mediterranean Sea, what constitutes a Mediterranean eating style? If you're interested in moving this direction, consider what these countries have in common.

- **Focus on fruits and vegetables.** Aim for variety as well as quantity. Frozen veggie blends provide a convenient way. Experiment with different salad greens and add assorted colorful vegetables. Fruit salads are an easy way to enjoy different kinds of fruit. Fresh fruit is a common Mediterranean dessert. Fresh, frozen, canned, dried... they all count!
- **Go for grains.** Complex carbohydrates like hearty breads, rice, and pasta are staples at Mediterranean tables. To maximize health benefits, choose whole grains whenever possible.
- **Move meat from center stage.** While red meat is eaten in the Mediterranean, portions are typically smaller, and it is eaten less frequently than in the U.S. To enjoy meat the Mediterranean way, consider using it to flavor soups, stews or casseroles. Skewer chunks of lean meat with vegetables for kebabs. Alternate meals with red meat with meals featuring fish – a Mediterranean favorite -- chicken, low-fat dairy or plant-based main dishes.
- **Boost beans and nuts.** Rich in protein and fiber, Mediterranean-style eating relies on beans and nuts as daily staples. While dried beans may be more traditional, canned beans are a great time saver. Up your intake by adding beans to soups, salads, stews, and casseroles or serving them solo. Hummus, a garbanzo bean-based dip, is a popular Mediterranean “small dish” typically eaten with crackers or toasted pita wedges. Nuts can be added to pasta sauces, grain dishes and salads.
- **Use olive oil to replace butter or margarine.** Olive oil, rich in monounsaturated fat, is the main source of fat used in Mediterranean cooking and on Mediterranean tables. Try using olive oil when sautéing vegetables, to add a touch of flavor to pasta dishes, or combine with herbs or spices for bread.
- **If you drink wine, enjoy a glass with dinner.** Moderate amounts of red wine are typically consumed with meals in many Mediterranean countries.

All in all, a Mediterranean eating style features foods as a feast for your senses as well as your health.

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