



Life Balance

Healthy matters to keep in mind.

December 2014

The Mediterranean diet: A celebration of life

Though it's called the Mediterranean diet, there's nothing restrictive about it. It's the traditional way of eating for most people of Greece, Southern Italy, Spain and Morocco.¹ And if you know anything about these countries, you know that every meal is a celebration of life.

That said, you don't have to live abroad in order to experience this cuisine. As a matter of fact, you can eat like the locals and reap the health benefits they enjoy while shopping at your neighborhood supermarket or farmer's market.

The Mediterranean diet will improve not only your body, but your mind as well, and help keep you younger longer.

Help lower your health risks

For years, researchers have known that a Mediterranean diet can help reduce the risk of obesity, diabetes, osteoporosis, even breast and colon cancer.²

Preliminary studies have found that faithful adherence to a Mediterranean diet will slow mental decline.³ It's a brain-healthy regimen that is low in artery-clogging fat and cholesterol — regarded as major culprits of Alzheimer's disease — and rich in omega-3 fatty acids.⁴

Yes, fat, but good fat. Omega-3 fatty acids are essential for many normal body functions, such as controlling blood clotting and building cell membranes in the brain. But because our bodies cannot make omega-3 fats, we must get them from our food. Omega-3 fatty acids are known to protect against heart disease and strokes. In addition, lack of sufficient omega-3 fatty acids in the body can result in fatigue, poor memory, dry skin, mood swings, depression and poor circulation.⁵

A feast for the brain

The Mediterranean diet uses fresh, flavorful ingredients,⁶ primarily:

- Plenty of fish and other seafood
- Fresh fruits and vegetables
- Nuts
- Grains
- Legumes
- Olive oil and olives
- Garlic and spices instead of heavy sauces and gravies
- Moderate amounts of wine

Olive oil

Olive oil is used mostly sprayed on vegetables or as a salad dressing. Olive oil, although a fat, is a monounsaturated fat (MUFA), and unsaturated fats promote good health.⁷ Use them instead of butter, margarine and other trans fats found in dressing and spreads.

A word of caution though: use it in moderation. However beneficial olive oil happens to be, you must remember it is still a fat, and, as such, contains calories that can add up.

It's not a diet — it's a legacy.

The Mediterranean diet was proclaimed an Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO in 2010. Here's what this world organization had to say about it.²⁸

"The Mediterranean diet is characterized by a nutritional model that has remained constant over time and space. . . . always respecting beliefs of each community. . . . The Mediterranean diet encompasses more than just food. It promotes social interaction, since communal meals are the cornerstone of social customs and festive events."

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Fatty fish

Again, we're talking about good fat here. Cold-water fatty fish, such as salmon, halibut, mackerel, lake trout, herring, sardines and albacore tuna,⁸ are very flavorful, and easy to cook. Spice them up and bake or grill, rather than fry. Eating at least two servings of fish a week has been shown to reduce the risk of stroke by as much as 50 percent.⁹

Antioxidants — help your brain breathe

The Mediterranean diet is also rich in antioxidants. Antioxidants are wonderful little molecules that fight off free radicals. Free radicals can create oxidation (or rust) in the brain and speed up the process of mental decline. In fact, research has shown that oxidative damage precedes the amyloid plaques known to be one of the byproducts of Alzheimer's disease.¹⁰ The job of antioxidants is to seek and soak up free radicals before they can cause the fuzzy memory, slow learning, loss of coordination and dementias that can plague your brain as you age.¹¹

Antioxidants abound in fresh fruit and veggies. To make it simple, shop by colors: the darker, the better.¹² Blue seems to be the most powerful. Raw blueberries have the highest percentage of antioxidants by far.¹³ But if blue is not your color, feel free to mix it up with deep greens, purples, reds, oranges and yellows.

The following are of some of the most important antioxidants along with some interesting facts about them.

Vitamin C

Vitamin C protects your DNA and other cellular components of the brain. If depleted, vitamin C will be leached out of body tissues and transported to the brain. If it couldn't do that, the brain could be destroyed by an army of free radicals in a matter of minutes.¹⁴ So it's wise to keep your vitamin C levels topped off.

Vitamin C can be found in dark green veggies and colorful fruits, such as kale, collards, cabbage, cranberries, citrus fruits, strawberries, apples, and the list goes on.¹⁵

Vitamin E

Almost 60 percent of your brain matter consists of fats that create all the cell membranes in your body.¹⁶ Vitamin E is the primary fat-soluble antioxidant in the body, and it's also responsible for protecting the brain. That's why vitamin E is so crucial to your overall health.¹⁷

Studies have proven that taking large doses of vitamin E may prevent strokes, as it helps prevent the hardening of the arteries.¹⁸ A stroke can cause lasting brain damage, loss of vision, speech problems, paralysis and even death.¹⁹

Yummy sources of vitamin E include seeds, nuts, soybeans, brown rice, oats, eggs, fresh wheat germ, Brussels sprouts and broccoli.²⁰

Vitamins B

B stands for brain. Vitamins B1, B6 and B12 help improve your mental abilities and moods. The Bs can be found in poultry, fish, whole grains, eggs, beans, peas, fresh leafy green vegetables, papaya, oranges, cantaloupe, wheat germ and brewers' or nutritional yeast.²¹

Vitamin B1

Vitamin B1 keeps your nervous system roaring and is responsible for good mental health. Deficiency can cause nerves to become hypersensitive and a person to become irritable, apathetic and forgetful.²²

Vitamin B6

Vitamin B6 helps in the development of the brain, nerves, skin and other body parts. Low levels of B6 have shown to accelerate atherosclerosis²³ — or the hardening of arteries²⁴ — in rats.

Vitamin B12

Low levels of vitamin B12, or folic acid, can cause an array of symptoms, from poor memory, problems with balance and reduced sensation in the limbs, to more serious symptoms such as severe nerve damage, dementia and Alzheimer's disease.²⁵

Magnesium

Studies have shown a strong correlation between stress and low levels of magnesium. When you're stressed, your neurons continuously fire electrical impulses, which can lead to muscle tension and spasms, among other symptoms. Magnesium, along with vitamin B1, helps repair the damage done by this continuous firing. The higher the stress, the more magnesium you'll need. Conversely, low levels of magnesium will also lead to higher stress levels.²⁶

Enjoyable sources of magnesium²⁷ are almonds, cashews, mixed nuts, pumpkin seeds, cooked spinach, avocados, potatoes, tahini and bran flakes.

Here's to a healthier life!

When you feel good, every day is a holiday. So why not celebrate year-round by enjoying delectable dishes packed with the nutrients that will make your body and your mind sing all day long.

Resources

www.liveandworkwell.com

For related information, search under the word "Diet." You will also find healthy weight calculators, videos and webinars in the Healthy Eating Center.

1 <http://www.unesco.org/archives/multimedia/index.php?s=flvplayer&pg=33&vo=2&vl=Eng&id=1680>

2 <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/omega-3/>

3 <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed>

4 http://www.alz.org/we_can_help_adapt_a_brain_healthy_diet.asp

5 <http://umm.edu/health/medical/altmed/supplement/omega3-fatty-acids>

6–7 Ibid.

8 http://www.alz.org/we_can_help_adapt_a_brain_healthy_diet.asp

9 <http://umm.edu/health/medical/altmed/supplement/omega3-fatty-acids>

10 <http://www.fi.edu/learn/brain/micro.html>

11 Ibid.

12 http://www.alz.org/we_can_help_adapt_a_brain_healthy_diet.asp

13 <http://www.fi.edu/learn/brain/micro.html>

14–18 Ibid.

19 <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/health-topics/topics/catd/>

20 <http://www.fi.edu/learn/brain/micro.html>

21 <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/vitamin-b/>

22 <http://www.fi.edu/learn/brain/micro.html>

23 <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16768830>

24 <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/health-topics/topics/atherosclerosis/>

25 <http://www.fi.edu/learn/brain/micro.html>

26 Ibid.

27 <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/RL/00394>

28 <http://www.unesco.org/archives/multimedia/index.php?s=flvplayer&pg=33&vo=2&vl=Eng&id=1680>

