

INFORMATION

For people with diabetes

Diabetes and the Mediterranean diet

Research already suggests that the Mediterranean diet – rich in fish, fruits, nuts, and olive oil – can prevent second heart attacks, delay Alzheimer’s disease, and possibly even lower your cancer risk. It is also one of the diets recommended by the American Diabetes Association as one that can be helpful for people with type 2 diabetes.

What is a Mediterranean diet?

A Mediterranean diet reflects the traditional cooking and lifestyle of countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea. It includes vegetables, whole grains, fish, poultry, and healthy fats, such as olive oil. While wine in moderation is part of the Mediterranean diet, people with diabetes should consult with their doctor before they start drinking alcohol. And it’s fine to skip the wine for people who don’t drink.

Some guidelines:

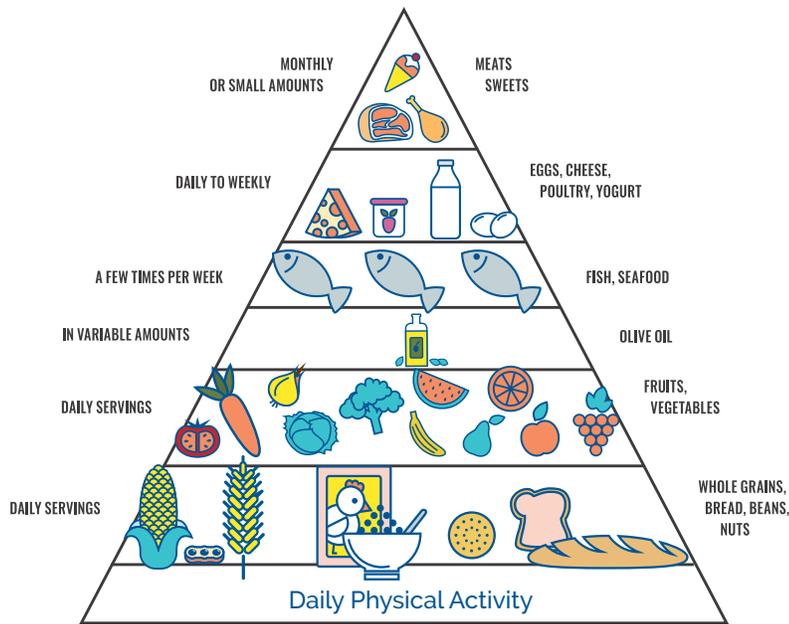
- Eat lots of veggies. Have them raw, roasted, in salads and stews. Pack as many as possible into every meal.
- Switch to whole grains and eat them daily. Avoid white breads and other processed foods (more on whole grains below).
- Replace unhealthy fats such as hydrogenated oils that are in processed foods with healthy fats such as olive oil and nuts.
- Season your food with herbs and spices instead of salt.
- Limit red meat to a few times a month.
- Eat fish and poultry at least twice a week, especially fish rich in omega-3 fatty acids such as tuna, herring, salmon, and sardines.
- Skip the sweets. For dessert, eat fresh fruit.
- Enjoy meals with family and friends.
- Exercise daily. Get up and move 20-30 minutes a day, whether it’s walking, running, biking, swimming, yoga, or just playing with your kids.

A study published in *Annals of Internal Medicine* compared the effect of the Mediterranean diet and a low-fat diet on people newly diagnosed with type 2 diabetes. In the study, people on the Mediterranean diet consumed at least 30% of their daily calories from fat (mostly olive oil). People on the low-fat diet consumed less than 30% of their daily calories from fat. Yet people on the Mediterranean diet lost more weight and managed their diabetes without medication longer, compared to the people on a low-fat diet. Not the results we would necessarily expect!



Four years after the study, 44% of people who ate a Mediterranean diet needed diabetes medication, compared to 70% of the people on a low-fat diet.

The Mediterranean food pyramid describes which foods you should eat monthly, weekly, and daily.



What don't you eat on a Mediterranean diet?

High-carb processed foods such as white bread, white rice, bagels, and pasta (also known as simple carbohydrates) – which have been shown to significantly increase blood sugar levels in people with diabetes.

Instead, the Mediterranean diet contains complex carbohydrates, which have more nutrients and take longer for your body to digest, so they help fill you up and don't cause the same swings in blood sugars as simple carbs. Foods that contain complex carbohydrates include vegetables, peas, beans, and whole grains.

What's so great about whole grains anyway?

All grains (such as wheat, corn, rice, oats, barley, quinoa, sorghum, spelt, and rye) start life as whole grains. Foods containing whole grains means that all three original parts – the bran, germ, and endosperm – are present in the same proportions as when the grain was growing in the ground.

The refining process that produces white flour and white rice, for example, removes the bran and the germ, leaving only the endosperm. It strips the grain of its fiber and many important nutrients.

Whole grains such as whole wheat flour and brown rice are high in fiber, which is a carbohydrate your body can't

digest and helps slow down the absorption of sugar into the bloodstream. Other benefits you gain from fiber are the feeling of fullness and bowel regularity.

It's not just about the food, it's a lifestyle

While called the Mediterranean diet, it's really a way of life. Relaxed meals with family and friends are a core part of life in the Mediterranean region. Not only will you enjoy the company, but eating with others (as opposed to gobbling food in front of the TV) will lead to eating more slowly. You'll be able to listen to your body's fullness signals and eat only until you're full. This positive attitude toward eating also helps improve digestion and lower stress. Daily exercise is an important aspect as well.

While there is no "one size fits all" eating pattern for people with diabetes, the Mediterranean diet is one option that is reasonable for managing diabetes, losing weight, and promoting heart health. And who knows, you might even be inspired to go to the Mediterranean!

Sources:
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