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EXTENSION SERVICE

A Taste of the Mediterranean

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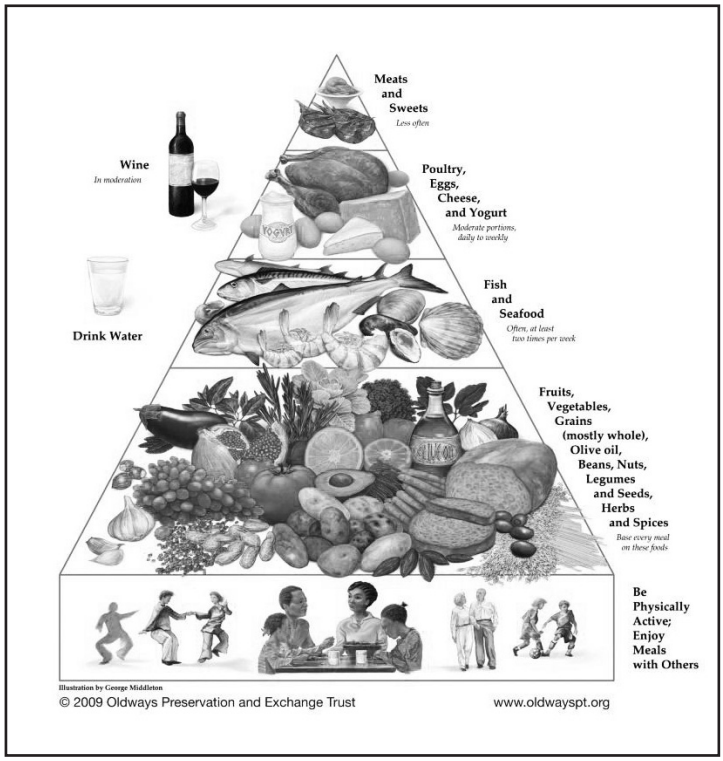
Studies have shown that a Mediterranean diet pattern is associated with lower risk for heart disease, stroke, Parkinson's disease, dementia , diabetes, some types of cancer, and death from all causes.

The Mediterranean Diet

There is much buzz lately about the good health of residents in the Mediterranean region. A Mediterranean diet consists of local fresh fruits and vegetables, legumes, fish, and very little red meat or dairy products. Bread is eaten with most meals and low to moderate amounts of red wine are consumed with food. Butter is rarely used, but olive oil is a mainstay. In addition, residents of the Mediterranean region are very active and have a cultural history of savoring food, both which contribute greatly to their health.



Health Benefits of a Mediterranean Diet

Epidemiological studies (studies of populations) have shown that a Mediterranean diet pattern is associated with lower risk for heart disease, stroke, Parkinson's disease, dementia, diabetes, some types of cancer, and death from all causes. The more closely a person's usual diet adheres to a Mediterranean diet pattern, the greater the benefit.

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For example, a study of dietary patterns in postmenopausal women showed that those whose diets were moderately similar to the Mediterranean diet had a 4 percent lower risk of breast cancer compared to women whose diets were not similar. Those with a high degree of similarity had a 41 percent lower risk for breast cancer. The same pattern was seen in the risk of death from all causes in middle-aged adults. In those whose diets were somewhat similar to the Mediterranean diet, the risk of death was decreased by 42 percent compared to those whose diets were not similar and it was decreased by 62 percent in those whose diets were highly similar.

What is it about the Mediterranean diet that makes it so healthy? One factor is the high ratio of monounsaturated to saturated fats, which is associated with decreased abdominal fat, inflammation, insulin resistance, triglycerides, and blood pressure. Another factor is the large variety of foods, which ensures all the essential vitamins and minerals are present in the diet. These foods also contain different phytochemicals (compounds made by plants) that have health benefits and are not available from supplements. Red wine, olive oil, and many plant-based foods contain antioxidants that protect the body's cell walls from damage.

In studies, people whose usual diets were closest to the Mediterranean diet benefited the most; however, there are some potential concerns. It is important to note that all fats, even healthy oils, are high in calories, and a diet that is high in monounsaturated fat can lead to obesity. The amount of fat that a person needs depends on the number of calories that they need for their size, muscle mass, and activity level. A general rule of thumb is 5 teaspoons of oil a day for women and 6 teaspoons of oil a day for men, including the amount that occurs naturally in foods.

Tomates Provençale – Baked tomatoes with garlic, parsley, and bread crumbs

This simple dish from Provençale, Italy, often suffers from flavorless tomatoes with too much liquid. Seek out fresh, vine-ripened tomatoes and be sure to rid them of excess liquid, so the tops will acquire a crusty finish.

6 large, firm but ripe tomatoes
4 Tablespoons olive oil
½ cup fine, dried, bread crumbs
3 cloves of garlic, minced
½ cup chopped fresh flat-leaf (Italian) parsley
Salt and pepper

1. Preheat oven to 375 degrees F and lightly oil a baking dish.
2. Cut the tomatoes in half crosswise. Sprinkle with salt and drain, cut sides down, in a colander for about 10 minutes. Dry well with paper towels.
3. In a large sauté pan over medium-high heat, warm 2 Tablespoons of oil. Add the tomato halves, cut side down and fry until golden, about 5 minutes. Place the tomatoes, cut side up, in the prepared baking dish. Sprinkle with salt and pepper.
4. In a small bowl stir together the bread crumbs, garlic, and a little of the parsley. Spread atop the tomatoes. Drizzle with remaining 2 Tablespoons of oil.
5. Bake until the tops are golden, 10 to 15 minutes. Transfer to a platter and sprinkle with the remaining parsley.
6. Serve warm or at room temperature. Serves 6.

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