WLG 57

WestVirginiaUniversity
EXTENSION SERVICE

A Taste of the Mediterranean

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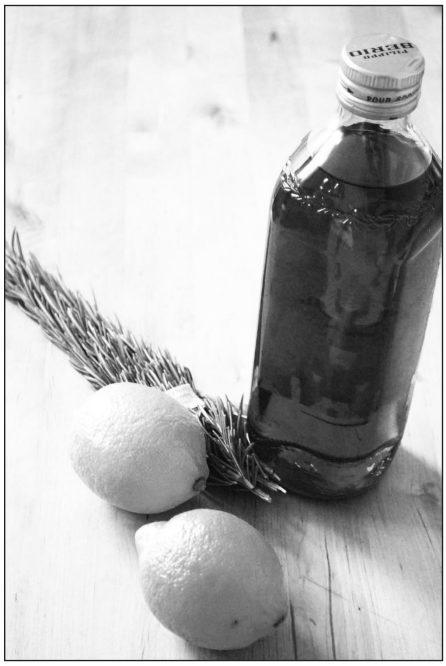
Educational Objectives

1. Identify the healthy ingredients of a Mediterranean diet.
2. Understand the health benefits of a Mediterranean lifestyle.
3. Increase knowledge of the Mediterranean history and culture.

The Mediterranean Diet



There is much buzz lately about the good health enjoyed by residents of the Mediterranean region. Some would try to convince us that if we just adopted a Mediterranean diet, we would all be healthy – and there is some truth to that. However, health is more than just the type of food consumed – it incorporates your entire lifestyle. Residents of the Mediterranean region are healthy because of their diet, as well as their lifestyle and culture.

A Mediterranean diet consists primarily of local fresh fruits and vegetables, legumes, and fish with 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 – that means no more than one 6-ounce glass for women and two for men per day. Butter is rarely used, but olive oil is a mainstay. It is often said the Mediterranean trilogy is olive oil, bread, and wine. In addition, residents of the Mediterranean region are very active and have a cultural history of savoring food.

History and Geography of the Mediterranean

The Mediterranean Sea is often referred to as "The Sea of Life." There are 21 countries bordering the sea and three continents: Asia, Europe, and Africa. The 21 countries are often grouped into seven regions: Spain, France, Italy, Greece and the Balkans, Turkey, the Middle East, and North Africa. If it weren't for the Strait of Gibraltar, the area would be landlocked. There is access to the Black Sea (often referred to as an annex of the Mediterranean Sea) and the Red Sea via the manmade Suez Canal that was completed in 1869.

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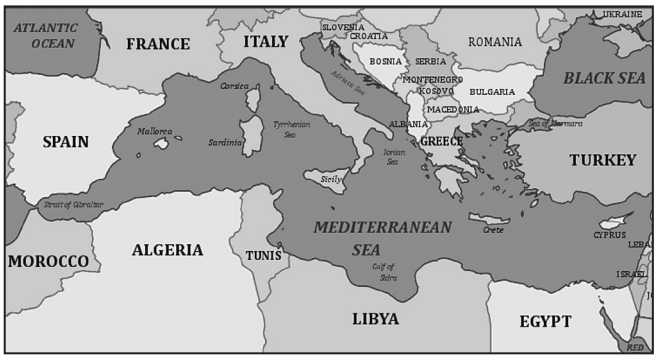
Because of limited accessibility, Mediterranean residents became self-supporting and often had more in common with their neighbors that shared the sea, as opposed to their nationality. As a result, there are many similarities in food consumption and preparation.

In addition, different rulers and nationalities influenced the production and trade of food and spices. The Romans cultivated the wheat fields of Spain, Sicily, and North Africa and promoted the intensive cultivation of the olive. Today, Spain produces more olives than any other country, and the Mediterranean region provides more than 90 percent of the world's olives.



Seven centuries of Muslim rulers greatly influenced Spain and the Mediterranean. The early Arabs were known as traders and city builders, but their claim to fame for the Mediterranean was as agriculturists. Through irrigation systems (subterranean irrigation canals, aqueducts, and waterwheels), they were able to greatly expand farming. They cultivated many products that today are considered staples of the Mediterranean diet: eggplants, artichokes, asparagus, spinach, figs, apricots, dates, almonds, and spices, such as nutmeg, cumin, cinnamon, turmeric, cloves, saffron, and vanilla. The Arabs also introduced the cultivation of citrus fruits, namely the famed Valencia orange, and improved fishing methods.

Chocolate even has its roots in the Mediterranean. Spain had a monopoly on chocolate before it was introduced to France and others. It is clear to see that the Mediterranean has a colorful history that was influenced over time by religion, conquest, and trade, which resulted in its rich culture.

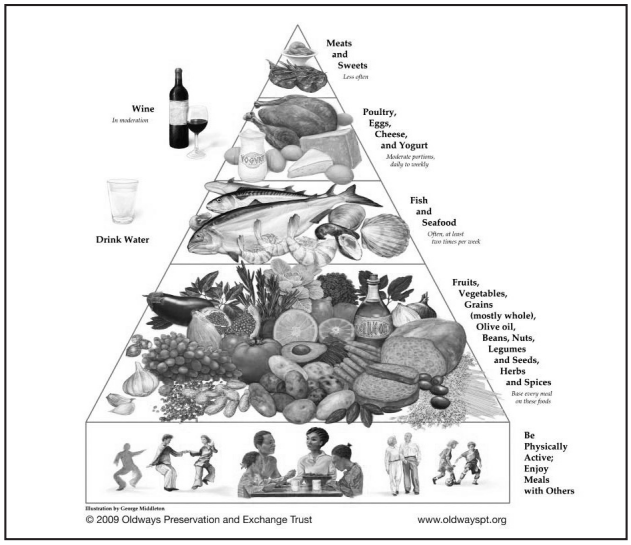
Mediterranean Lifestyle

Historically speaking, influences of the past have not only affected the food that is produced and consumed, but also the cultural relationship with food. Eating is not just about sustenance – it is a time to share and be outdoors. Because of the relative isolation over the years, the Mediterranean culture emphasizes loyalty to family and community, as opposed to loyalty to the nation-state. Food is a central component of this. Meals are prepared and enjoyed within the family unit, preferably with guests, and fasts and feasts are common in observance of religious days.

Originally, the people of the Mediterranean were hardworking peasants who worked the land and the sea to provide for their families. Although Roman and Arab influence improved and expanded production, the residents retained their diligent work ethic. Today, the culture still reflects an active society that works hard and often walks or uses bicycles. Leisure time and being active are valued by the Mediterranean society.

It must be noted, though, that Western culture is invading the Mediterranean. More women

are working outside the home, which makes family meal preparation challenging. The tourist industry has fostered the invasion of fast food chains and the waters of "The Sea of Life" are heavy with pollution, which is threatening the fish and seafood.



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 (10 percent lower), stroke (30 percent lower), Parkinson's disease (13 percent lower), dementia (13 percent lower), diabetes (59 percent lower), 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.

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 that all the essential vitamins and minerals are present in the diet. In addition to vitamins and minerals, these foods 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.

Activities

1. Print the map of the Mediterranean Sea with surrounding countries identified at *http://www.worldatlas.com/aatlas/infopage/medsea.htm*. Cut out the seven regions or the 21 countries (your choice). Glue or tape the Mediterranean Sea on a white sheet of paper. Give participants the regions or countries, asking them to place the regions/countries on the map.
2. Purchase or make Mediterranean food for participants to sample, such as hummus and pita chips or good quality olives. Olives stored in brine tend to get very salty so try to find olives stored in olive oil.
3. Collect spices that are popular in the Mediterranean diet, such as rosemary, nutmeg, cumin, cinnamon, turmeric, cloves, saffron, and vanilla. Do a smell test to have participants identify the spice.
4. The chart below lists two or three classic dishes from each of the seven Mediterranean regions. Cut the chart apart. Place each of the seven regions on a table. Give each participant a classic dish and ask them to match the classic dish with its region of origin.

Mediterranean Regions	Classic Dishes
Spain	**Paella valenciana** – named for the two-handled shallow pan it is cooked in, it generally contains rice, rabbit or chicken, tomatoes, beans, and often snails
	Gazpacho – a cold vegetable soup with a tomato base
Turkey	**Yogurtlu kebab** – lamb kebabs with yogurt and tomato sauces
	Baba ghannouj – an appetizer of pureed eggplant with tahini
Greece	**Baklava** – filo pastry layered with nuts and sugar
	Tsatziki – a cucumber and yogurt dish served cold
The Middle East	**Tabbouleh** – a cold salad made from bulgar, parsley, onions, mint, tomatoes, lemon juice, and olive oil
	Hummus bi tahini – an appetizer of chickpea puree with sesame and tahini
Italy	**Malanzane alla parmigiana** – fried eggplant layered with tomato sauce and cheese
	Pasta con le sarde – pasta with sardines, currants, and pine nuts
Northern Africa	**Mrouzia** – lamb tagine with honey, almonds, and raisins
	Couscous – steamed semolina grain
France	**Bouillabaisse** – fish chowder or stew consisting of at least three types of fish, some shell fish, and a flavorful broth with a lot of herbs and spices
	Ratatouille – vegetable dish containing tomatoes, garlic, onion, zucchini, eggplant, bell peppers, herbs, and spices

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