

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

“Mediterranean-Style” Diets are Causing Scientists to Take Another Look at Diet Recommendations Vol. 3 Issue 1

Recently, some scientists have started to question the efficacy of low-fat diets in promoting heart health. Research has shown that the quality of the fat in the diet, rather than the quantity, may make a difference when it comes to preventing chronic disease. As a result, Mediterranean-style diets, which

are high in unsaturated fat and low in saturated fat, are being assessed in terms of:

- High- to moderate-fat diets vs. low-fat diets;
- Benefits of plant-based diets; and
- “Eating satisfaction” of healthy, traditional diets.

What is a “Mediterranean-Style” Diet?

The Mediterranean-style diet is based on the dietary traditions of the people of the many regions bordering the Mediterranean Sea, including Greece, Southern Italy, Spain, Southern France, Tunisia, Lebanon, and Morocco. They eat an abundance of fruits, vegetables, nuts and legumes, and whole grains; some dairy products, fish and poultry; and very small amounts of meats. The main source of fat, which usually constitutes 35-40% of calories, is monounsaturated fat from olive oil and nuts and omega-3 fat from fish (1). In addition, a Mediterranean-style diet includes moderate amounts of alcohol, particularly wine, which has been associated with a reduced risk of cardiovascular disease and seems to be compatible with a healthy lifestyle (2).

Mediterranean diets have long been known for their many delicious tastes and flavors. Recently, the many health benefits of Mediterranean-style eating are being realized.

**Consensus Statement
1998 International Conference on the
Mediterranean Diet**

“There is increasing scientific evidence that there are positive health effects from diets that are high in fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole grains, which include fish, nuts, and low fat dairy products. Such diets need not be restricted in total fat as long as there is not an excess of calories and the diet is low in saturated and partially hydrogenated oils. Diets that emphasize vegetable oils (predominantly monounsaturated), nuts, and fish are preferable to those high in animal products and partially hydrogenated oils. Many individuals will have to limit their fat or carbohydrate intake to avoid excess calories.”

—Nutrition Today July/August 1998

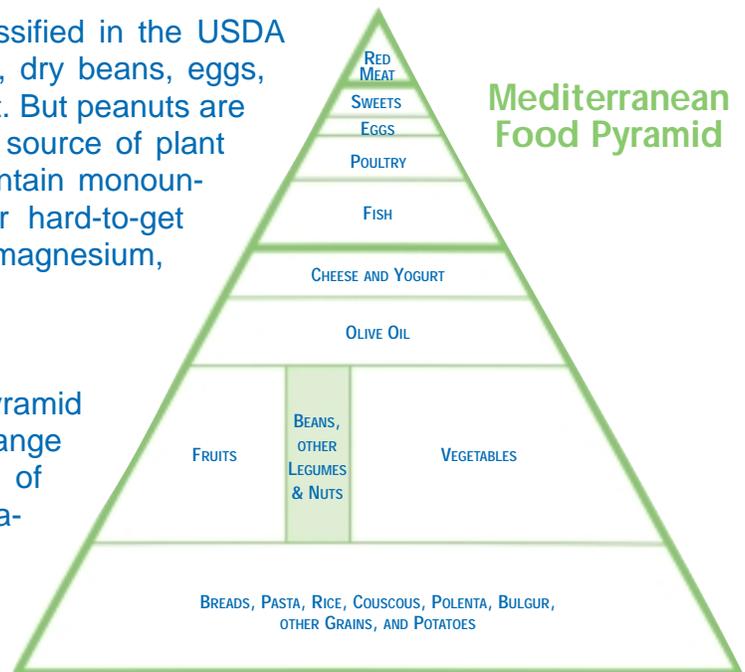
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The Mediterranean Diet Pyramid

Today, peanuts and peanut butter are classified in the USDA Food Guide Pyramid with meat, poultry, fish, dry beans, eggs, and nuts because of their high protein content. But peanuts are actually legumes, making them an excellent source of plant protein with no cholesterol. Peanuts also contain monounsaturated (good) fat, fiber, and many other hard-to-get nutrients such as folate, niacin, vitamin E, magnesium, copper, and phosphorus.

The Traditional Healthy Mediterranean Diet Pyramid developed by Oldways Preservation & Exchange Trust in conjunction with Harvard School of Public Health and The World Health Organization places nuts, peanuts, peanut butter, and other legumes and seeds on the same level as fruits and vegetables that should be eaten daily.



LBS OFF “Mediterranean-Style” Weight Loss Diet

A Mediterranean weight-loss diet can be adapted to different cultures. In addition, it can provide more variability and palatability than traditional weight-loss diets. Researchers at Harvard School of Public Health in Boston, Massachusetts, have found that patients are twice as likely to stick to a high monounsaturated fat diet that includes foods like peanuts and other nuts, peanut butter, avocados and olive oil as sources of good fat in the diet (4). The following is a one day menu sample:

Breakfast

- 1 egg white and 1/4 green pepper sautéed in 2 tsp. canola, peanut, or olive oil
- 1 slice whole wheat bread with 1 tsp. peanut butter
- 1 banana
- coffee or tea

Lunch

- Cook 3 oz. skinless chicken breast and 1.5 cups fresh spinach in 1 tbsp. olive oil/1 tbsp. vinegar mixture
- 1 sesame seed breadstick
- 1 cup skim milk
- 1 orange

Snacks

- 1 oz. (15 whole) roasted peanuts
- 1/2 cup frozen vanilla yogurt

Dinner

- 3 oz. large shrimp and 2 cups seasonal vegetables sautéed in 2 tsp. peanut oil
- 1 cup skim milk
- coffee or tea

Nutrient Profile:

Calories= 1500
Cholesterol= 219 mg
Total fat= 37% (7% saturated fat)
Fiber= 21.5 g

Nutrition Research Highlights

Scientists think that in addition to the monounsaturated fat in peanuts, other components contribute to their heart healthfulness. Potentially protective nutrients include high amounts of plant protein, magnesium, vitamin E, fiber, and potassium (5). In addition, many plant sterols and phytochemicals are still being discovered in peanuts, making them a complex food with many health benefits.

Epidemiological Studies

The evidence linking frequent peanut and nut consumption to a 25-50% reduced risk of heart disease (5,6,7) is strong. Two new studies further confirm that frequently eating a small amount of peanuts promotes heart health.

In The Nurses' Health Study published in the November 1998 *British Medical Journal*, researchers at Harvard School of Public Health found that "frequent consumption of peanuts and nuts was associated with a lowered risk of coronary heart disease (CHD)." (5) Even after adjusting for age, smoking, and other known risk factors for CHD, of the 86,000 women in this study, those who ate more than five servings of nuts, peanuts, and peanut butter per week decreased their risk of heart disease by about one third, compared to women who rarely or never ate nuts.

Preliminary results of the Physicians' Health Study, presented at the American Heart Association 1998 Scientific Sessions, found similar results. In a group of 22,000 male physicians, the risk of cardiac death and sudden death decreased as nut consumption increased (6).

Cholesterol Lowering Diets

A Pennsylvania State University controlled study tested three different diets, all high in monounsaturated fat (MUFA) and low in saturated fat and cholesterol—a diet with peanuts and peanut butter, one with peanut oil, and one with olive oil. Researchers found that these high MUFA diets, compared to the Average American Diet, lowered total cholesterol by 11%, LDL cholesterol by 14%, and

triglyceride levels by 13%. In addition, the high MUFA diets did not lower beneficial HDL cholesterol levels, like the low-fat diet did (8).

Phytochemicals

Researchers at the USDA Agricultural Research Service at North Carolina State University have identified resveratrol, the phytochemical in red wine, in peanuts (9). The "French Paradox" associates resveratrol's presence in red wine with reduced cardiovascular disease and refers to the fact that, despite consuming a relatively high-fat diet, the French have surprisingly low rates of heart disease (10).

Peanuts also contain other plant chemicals, such as phytosterols and isoflavones. B-sitosterol (SIT), a phytosterol thought to inhibit cancer growth, has been identified in peanuts, peanut butter, peanut flour and peanut oil. SIT may offer protection from colon, prostate and breast cancer. The amount of protective SIT found in unrefined peanut oil (191 SIT/100 gm) is comparable to that of soybean oil (183 SIT/100 gm) and greater than unrefined olive oil (139 SIT/gm) (11).

Eating Satisfaction

A study at Purdue University found that, after participants ate peanuts and peanut butter, they felt more satisfied over a three hour period than after eating other high-carbohydrate snack foods such as rice cakes (12). Additionally, since they were more satisfied by the higher monounsaturated fat snack, they did not increase their daily calorie intake and did not gain weight.

Putting the “Mediterranean-Style” Diet into Practice

Small changes in your diet can trigger big results in heart healthfulness. You can “style” your diet after the Mediterranean diet with a few simple changes:

- ✓ Use foods and oils rich in monounsaturated fats as the main source of fat in your diet to enhance vegetable, legume, lentil, fruit, and grain dishes. The Mediterranean Diet Pyramid features monounsaturated fats, such as olive, peanut, and canola oil, as a means of maintaining good health.
- ✓ Increase the variety of fruits, vegetables, legumes, whole grains, nuts, peanuts and peanut butter in your diet. This will increase your daily intake of antioxidants, phytochemicals, and fiber, all of which have been linked to a decreased risk of certain types of cancer (13,14).
- ✓ The main course of your meal should bring plant foods to the center of your plate, and use meat as a complement.

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The Peanut Institute is a non-profit organization dedicated to expanding state-of-the-art knowledge regarding peanuts and peanut products. A special emphasis is placed on establishing sound science as the basis for food, nutrition, and health discussions about peanuts.

The Peanut Institute pursues its mission through research programs, educational initiatives, and the promotion of healthful lifestyles to consumers of all ages. As an independent forum, The Peanut Institute is uniquely positioned to work with all segments of the food industry, the research community, academia, consumer organizations and government.



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