



Eating the Mediterranean Way

By Rebecca Fliszar

If you're looking for a way to improve your heart health, you might consider eating the Mediterranean way. Researchers have studied how people eat around the world and found that individuals who live in countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea follow some general principles in how they eat that lowers their low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol (the "bad" cholesterol) and improves their overall heart health.

You might be familiar with some of the more common principles of the diet—such as cooking with olive oil or perhaps you've heard drinking a glass of red wine might help your heart—but there's more to it than that.

Like most heart healthy eating plans, the Mediterranean plan includes eating more fruits, vegetables, fish and whole grains. It also encourages you to eat more of the healthy fats (e.g., olive oil, canola oil, nuts) and less of the unhealthy fats (e.g., butter, high-fat dairy foods). However, the key is all in the proportion of foods that you eat that really make the difference in your overall heart health.

In general, the main components of the Mediterranean eating plan are:

- Eating more fruits and vegetables with meals and as snacks
- Cooking with healthy fats like olive oil and canola oil
- Flavoring your food with herbs and spices instead of salt
- Eating a small portion of nuts (e.g., walnuts, almonds, pecans and Brazil nuts) as a snack each day

The Heart of New Ulm project is a collaborative partnership of Allina Hospitals & Clinics, the Minneapolis Heart Institute Foundation, the New Ulm Medical Center and the City of New Ulm.

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- Drinking red wine, in moderation. This means no more than 5 ounces of wine daily for women and no more than 10 ounces of wine daily for men. However, if you don't drink, don't start. Most benefits of red wine can also be obtained from drinking concord grape juice.
- Changing-up your main dishes. Eat some meals each week without meat and at least two times each week eat fish or shell fish.

While these principles sound simple enough, it's not always easy to change the way we eat. We may not be used to grabbing fruit for snacks, eating more vegetables and less meat (e.g., one brat instead of two), or trying olive oil instead of butter on bread.

However, if you start by making small changes in your usual food choices, and keep making those changes, they become a way of life. Over the past few months of heart health screenings for the Heart of New Ulm project, more than 2,000 participants to date have asked about how they can make changes to how they eat. Here are ten simple things you can do starting today to help you change how you eat and bring you one step closer to better health:

1. Eat a fruit or vegetable at every meal. Add fruit to cereal, a vegetable or fruit side salad to lunch or stack your sandwich with more vegetables, like tomato slices or onions.
2. Snack on raw vegetables instead of tortilla chips with salsa.
3. Eat natural peanut butter, rather than the kind made with hydrogenated fat.
4. Try canola or olive oil in cooking or occasionally on bread instead of margarine or butter.
5. Eat fish once a week instead of red meat. Try water-packed tuna, salmon, trout, mackerel and herring.

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6. Use a vinaigrette dressing in place of a mayonnaise-based dressing.
7. Choose low fat milk or yogurt.
8. Eat a small handful of nuts for a snack or try them on top of a fruit or vegetable salad.
9. Choose whole grain cereals and breads more often.
10. Season food with garlic, onions, herbs and spices instead of salt.

Adopting the Mediterranean way of life is possible; it just takes small changes and practice. Each healthy bite can bring you one step closer to good heart health.

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