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BE WELL CLASSIC

Mediterranean Eating for Beginners

By Debbie DeAngelo

May 2025 Originally November 2022

Editor's note: Following is a Be Well Classic by Debbie DeAngelo. The Jefferson first published it in November 2022.

Spain, Greece, Italy ... What do they all have in common? They are countries that border the Mediterranean Sea and eat traditional foods that are both nutritious and delicious.

By now most of us can extoll the virtues of eating a Mediterranean style diet. High in antioxidants and anti-inflammatory substances, it lowers the risk of disorders like arthritis, diabetes, dementia, heart disease, and cancer. Additionally, some of the oldest and healthiest people in the world live in the Mediterranean countries.

The basic premise when following this nutritional trailblazer is to eat an abundance of plant-based, minimally processed foods. More often than not, choose fruits, vegetables, legumes, whole grains, and nuts. Extra virgin olive oil (EVOO) is the principal source of fat, and dairy (cheese and yogurt) is eaten in moderation. Red meat is consumed infrequently, with seafood and chicken eaten a few times per week. Dessert typically consists of fresh fruit.

Plate Up Mediterranean Style

How can you implement these fundamentals into your daily meals? Begin with small changes and over time incorporate more. Here are some simple ways to get started.

Buy EVOO. A high-quality product not only tastes better but it's better for you because it's rich in disease fighters. Use it as an ingredient in salad dressing, mix with seasonings and dip bread into it instead of topping with butter, and drizzle this liquid gold on your vegetables.

Pick produce for every meal. Americans are lax on this one. Strive for at least one serving of fruit at breakfast and one cup or more of vegetables at lunch and dinner. Step out of your comfort zone and select new types of produce. Be sure to eat dark leafy greens, such as spinach, arugula, kale, or Swiss chard, often.

Go great grains. Whole grains are filling, contain fiber, and supply vitamins and minerals. Select whole grain bread, switch from white rice to brown or long-grain, make oatmeal from steel cut oats, and give other grains like quinoa, barley and farro a shot.

Cast a line. Many people enjoy fish when they dine out, yet don't cook it at home. Find a few simple, lip-smacking, seafood recipes and surprise your family. Substitute fish for red meat a few times a week.

Go nuts. Walnuts, pistachios, almonds – nuts contain protein, fiber and antioxidants. Since they also contain a lot of calories, limit yourself to a small handful daily. They make a great addition to a meal or a snack.

Spice it up. Mediterranean cooks prepare their meals using a variety of herbs and spices. These gems carry even more antioxidants than produce. Add cinnamon or nutmeg to your oatmeal, cocoa powder to your smoothie and tarragon or dill to your fish.

Wet your whistle. Water is still the beverage of choice; however, coffee and tea are fine too. Just be mindful of the amount of sugar and cream added. And last, but not least ... the coveted red wine. High in disease fighters, one glass of wine a day is considered moderation.

Sample Menu

Breakfast 1: Whole grain toast with almond nut butter, topped with sliced apples.

Breakfast 2: Banana split parfait (Sliced banana, Greek yogurt, strawberries, blueberries and nuts).

Lunch 1: Caprese (sliced tomatoes topped with fresh mozzarella cheese and basil leaves; drizzle with EVOO and balsamic vinegar). Eat a baked potato and broccoli with it.

Lunch 2: Turkey sandwich on whole grain bread and garden salad made with mesclun greens, topped with EVOO.

Supper 1: Fish (trout, salmon, cod), brown rice and a salad (spinach, arugula, spring greens).

Supper 2: Mediterranean pizza on a whole wheat crust, topped with lots of vegetables, sun dried tomatoes and artichokes.

Even though we're talking about the diet, it's crucial to keep in mind that the Mediterranean lifestyle is about more than food. They also engage in regular activity by moving consistently throughout the day. Another important aspect is their sense of community. Traditionally these cultures value family time and socialization. It's all of these essential parts that make the Mediterranean lifestyle so healthful.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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