

The Mediterranean Diet

◆ Why a Mediterranean Diet?

In the late 1950's researchers identified that the population of the island of Crete, off Greece, had the lowest cardiac mortality and greatest longevity on earth. Heart disease was so rare on the island that doctors had to look it up in textbooks. They commented that it was not unusual to see 80, 90, and 100 year old men going off to work in the fields everyday. They suspected and demonstrated the cause of this remarkable longevity was due to diet. Although the population of Crete was exceptional, people who lived in Southern Europe in countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea, all had a much lower risk of developing heart disease than did people in Northern Europe or the United States. Even 50 years ago, these researchers were able to show that the amount of saturated fat in the diet impacted the risk of developing heart disease.

Then in the 1990's, researchers in Lyon, France, decided to study what would happen to a group of patients with heart problems if they were taught to eat a Mediterranean diet. They instructed 605 patients who recently had a heart attack to eat either a standard American Heart Association (AHA) diet or a Mediterranean diet and followed them for 4 years. They found a dramatic 70% reduction in the risk of future heart attack and death in those patients given the Mediterranean diet versus the AHA diet. This is a more powerful benefit than any pill or surgery. If a diet alone can have a benefit of this magnitude, our patients certainly need to try to adopt it.

◆ What is a Mediterranean Diet?

The general principles of the Mediterranean Diet are:

- More bread.
- More vegetables, legumes (such as beans, peas and lentils), and grains.
- More fish.
- Less meat. (beef, lamb and pork replaced by poultry)
- No day without fruit.
- Olive oil is the principal fat. NO butter or cream. Four or less eggs per week in any form. Canola oil is permitted.
- Daily consumption of low to moderate amounts of cheese and yogurt (low-fat and nonfat versions may be preferable).
- Emphasis on minimally processed and seasonally fresh foods – avoid highly processed foods.
- Moderate consumption of wine (preferably red) normally taken with meals.
- Regular physical activity.

The food pyramid for the Mediterranean diet gives a rough idea of the frequency with which foods are consumed. Meat is intended to be eaten once a week – not for every meal as so many Americans do. Fish was a luxury in Crete in 1960, but we think now that 2 or more fish meals per week are desirable. Alcohol is preferably in the form of red wine and not beer or hard liquor.

Equally important is what is missing from the diet. Dessert is intended to be fruit and NOT chocolate cake, pies, ice cream or other sweets. Bread is meant to be plain bread without added sugar, butter or eggs, and NOT donuts or croissants. Processed meats such as bologna, salami, sausage – forget about it. Olive oil is the preferred oil (canola is allowed) but no butter, margarine, cream or mayonnaise.

A Mediterranean diet sounds terrific and conjures up images of all the great Italian and Greek restaurants at which you have eaten. I don't want to disappoint you, but the food you probably ordered at your last "American" Italian restaurant is probably not what we want you to have on a healthy Mediterranean diet. Spaghetti Carbonara (made with butter, egg yolks, cream and bacon), Paglia e Fieno (made with butter, sausage, cream and cheese), Linguini Alfredo (made with butter, cream egg yolks and cheese), and Tiramisu (made with butter, cream, and eggs) are NOT permitted choices.

The healthy Mediterranean diet, although delicious, is almost a vegetarian diet. If it is going to work and have the intended beneficial effects, it needs to be followed strictly with an understanding of the principles which make it work and an avoidance of detrimental elements present in the typical American diet.

◆ Why does the Mediterranean Diet work?

There are several hypotheses as to the mechanism of benefit of the Mediterranean diet.

- Lifestyle (active but with low-stress)
- Antioxidants (vitamins, flavonoids – in plant foods)
- Folic Acid (in vegetables – lowers homocysteine levels)
- Fish (omega-3 fatty acids)
- Oleic Acid (olive oil – has antithrombotic properties and raises HDL cholesterol relative to carbohydrates and polyunsaturates)
- α -linolenic acid (vegetable origin and in canola and soybean oils)
- Alcohol (raises HDL cholesterol)

◆ Where can I find Mediterranean Diet information and recipes?

Because the Mediterranean diet has become more popular you should be able to find a number of cookbooks at your local library or bookstore. Two which we recommend are:

The Mediterranean Diet Cookbook. Author: Nancy Harmon Jenkins. New York: Bantam books, 1994.

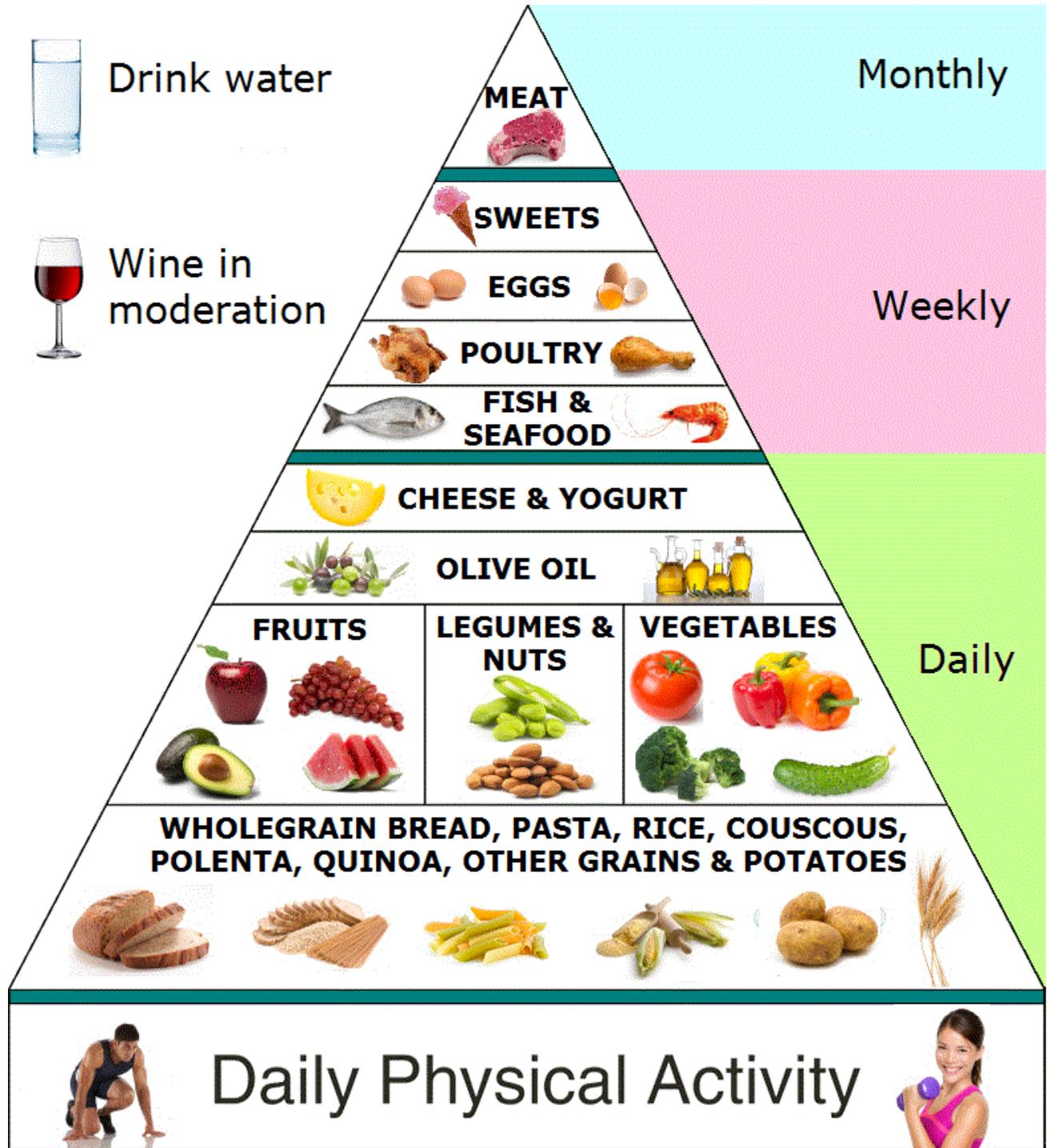
Vegetarian Times Cooks Mediterranean. From the Editors of *Vegetarian Times*. New York: William Morrow & Co., 1999.

If you have internet access, the following websites are interesting and educational. They contain general information on the Mediterranean diet and its benefits as well as selected recipes and links.

- <http://www.epicurious.com> (Search Mediterranean Diet Recipes)
- <http://www.eatingwell.com> (Search Mediterranean Diet Recipes)

Following is a link to a clever NY Times article by Mark Bittman on the Mediterranean Diet:

http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/27/dining/when-diet-meets-delicious-the-mediterranean-approach.html?_r=0



The Mediterranean Diet Pyramid