

# Meals of the Mediterranean

## *Plant Foods at the Center of the Plate*

The traditional meals of the Mediterranean region contain mostly foods from a variety of plant sources. The preparations and seasonings of foods may vary from one country to another but the high consumptions of cereals, grains, fruit, vegetables, beans, olive oil, garlic, fresh herbs, and seafood is similar throughout the Mediterranean region.

- In North Africa, couscous (a semolina grain), vegetables and legumes form the center of the diet.
- In Southern Europe rice, polenta, pasta, potatoes with vegetables and legumes form the center of the diet.
- In the Eastern Mediterranean bulgur and rice together with vegetables and legumes such as chick peas form the center of the diet.
- Throughout the Mediterranean, bread is a staple in the diet and is eaten without butter or margarine.

## *History of the Mediterranean Diet*

Today's Mediterranean cooking can be traced back to the ancient times. It was the contributions of foods from the different Mediterranean countries that make the Mediterranean diet what it is today.

The Mediterranean area is part of 3 continents and consists of Algeria, Amalfi Coast, Corfu Island, Cyprus, Egypt, France, French Riviera, Greece, Ibiza, Isle of Capri, Israel, Italy, Lebanon, Libya, Mallorca Island, Malta, Monaco, Morocco, Sicily, Spain, Syria, Tunisia, and Turkey.

## *Basic Characteristics of the Mediterranean Diet*

The preparation and seasonings of foods of the Mediterranean region may vary from one country to another. However, there are basic similarities in how Mediterranean people eat.

1. A major portion of the diet comes from plant sources, including fruits and vegetables, potatoes, breads and grains, beans, nuts, and seeds.

2. The diet consists of a variety of foods that are made from scratch and wherever possible, made from seasonally fresh and locally grown foods.
3. Olive oil is the principal source of fat and saturated fat makes up no more than 7 to 8 percent of the dietary calories.
4. Cheese and yogurt are eaten daily in low to moderate amounts.
5. Fresh fruit is a typical daily dessert. Sweets with a significant amount of sugar are consumed only a few times per week.
6. Red meat is eaten only a few times per month where as fish and poultry are eaten weekly.
7. Daily physical activity promotes healthy weight, fitness and well-being.
8. If wine is drunk, it is usually consumed with meals and in moderation; two glasses for men and one glass for women.

### **So, What is Special About the Mediterranean diet?**

For a long time researchers have been studying the diets of the Mediterranean people. Some studies show death rates from heart disease and the incidence of cancer are lower among Mediterranean populations. Some research attributes this to the diet but it probably includes other factors such as level of physical activity, body weight, genetics and pace of overall lifestyle.



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