

By now you've probably heard of the Mediterranean diet, though you may not really understand what it entails and why it is healthful. Most people associate the Mediterranean diet with the notion of eating more olive oil or drinking red wine. However, as numerous medical studies have now shown, there is more to it than just olive oil and wine.

First of all, the Mediterranean diet has repeatedly been associated with lower risks of heart disease and cancer. Cardiovascular benefits include:

- Decreased risk of coronary artery disease and heart attack
- Lower blood pressure
- Decreased risk of fatal arrhythmias (rhythm disturbances of the heart muscle)
- Lower levels of C-reactive protein (a sign of general inflammation in the bloodstream)

What is the Mediterranean Diet?

The typical Mediterranean diet is substantially higher in vegetables, fruits, and legumes when compared to the typical American diet. (People in Greece eat twice as many vegetables as most Americans eat.) Other aspects of the diet include moderate fish intake, lower meat intake, eggs zero to four times per week and moderate consumption of alcohol with meals.

When it comes to fat, the Greeks and other populations that border the Mediterranean do not skimp. What's unique is the type of fats consumed. When compared to the typical American diet, the Mediterranean diet is higher in monounsaturated fats, which is found in olive oil and nuts like almonds. By contrast, the American diet is often high in saturated fats like those found in butter, meats and full-fat dairy products. Monounsaturated fats do not raise blood cholesterol levels; however saturated fats do. The Mediterranean diet is also rich in polyunsaturated fats, specifically the omega-3 fats found in fish and walnuts.

The Mediterranean meal pattern includes:

- Generous amounts of fruits and vegetables every day
- Healthy fats such as olive oil and canola oil
- Herbs and spices to replace salt to flavor foods
- Small portions of red meat
- Fish or shellfish at least twice a week
- Small portions of nuts
- Red wine, in moderation, if appropriate

The bottom line is that it takes more than just olive oil and red wine to create the healthful effects of the Mediterranean diet. Researchers believe that it is the combination of the foods listed above, along with an active lifestyle that translates into lower heart disease risk. See a visual of the Mediterranean Diet Pyramid at right.

For more information or to schedule a nutrition consult with one of the Emory HeartWiseSM Risk Reduction Program's registered dietitians, please call 404-778-7777.

