

# The Mediterranean Diet is Ranked #1

*Here's how to make it work for you*



There's a lot of conflicting information out there about what we should eat to stay healthy. With so much contradiction, it's hard to know which foods are best. But recently, U.S. News & World Report set the record straight when it named the Mediterranean-style eating pattern the Best Diet Overall alongside the DASH diet.

This came as no surprise to best-selling author, chef, television personality, and educator Amy Riolo. A longtime ambassador of the Mediterranean diet, she recommends it to anyone who wants to enjoy better health—especially if you are one of the 25 million people in the U.S. with diabetes.

“If you have diabetes, embracing the foods of the Mediterranean region is one of the healthiest choices you could make,” says Riolo, author of the American Diabetes Association’s The Mediterranean Diabetes Cookbook, 2nd Edition: A Flavorful, Heart-Healthy Approach to Cooking (American Diabetes Association, May 2019). “This eating pattern has been proven effective in helping people manage and possibly prevent the onset of diabetes. And with its emphasis on plant-based foods and healthful proteins, it's easy to see why people in the Mediterranean region live long, healthy, and active lives.”

The Mediterranean diet and lifestyle have been linked to many impressive health outcomes. These include: Preventing heart attacks and strokes ; Preventing diabetes and reducing the amount of medications needed to manage diabetes ; Longevity ; Reducing inflammation ; Reducing risk of death from heart disease and certain cancers and Preventing cancer and inhibiting tumor growth

That's all great news. Another positive aspect of this diet is that it's surprisingly easy to adopt. Why? Because it is based on real food that tastes delicious and is easy to prepare.

**First, think of food as your friend.** To fully benefit from the Mediterranean diet, realize that food is nothing to be afraid of. By taking a positive attitude toward food, you will be able to understand the important role that it plays in the Mediterranean lifestyle. Throughout the region, food is viewed not only as a traditional medicine, but as a form of artistic expression, a social activity, a cultural relic, and most of all, an important symbol of hospitality.

**Eat an abundance of fruits and vegetables.** These make up the foundation of the Mediterranean diet. For the freshest, most affordable, and healthiest options, buy seasonal produce. Eating with the seasons helps you enjoy a wide variety of foods without growing tired of eating the same foods year-round. And remember, there are endless ways to enjoy fruits and veggies, so mealtimes will always be fresh and exciting.

**Get your grains (the backbone of the Mediterranean-style eating pattern).** Throughout the Mediterranean region, whole grains are an integral part of breakfast, first courses, side dishes, and baking. These plant-based foods are naturally low in saturated fat and cholesterol. These nutritional powerhouses help us look and feel our very best, and on top of that, they are easy to find and inexpensive. You can eat grains in soups and breads or enjoy servings of rice, grain, pasta, couscous, and quinoa.

“Many people with diabetes might have learned to do without pasta and rice in their diets,” says Riolo. “But when eaten in moderation, they can still be enjoyed.” Don't forget about beans, nuts, legumes, seeds, herbs, and spices. “Legumes and nuts are mild in flavor and high in protein and fiber,” says Riolo. “There are thousands of ways to transform them into extraordinary dishes with the help of herbs, spices, and a splash of olive oil. Likewise, nuts—more than just a snack or party food in the Mediterranean region—are often incorporated into fillings, dips, and sauces. Seeds are also an integral part of this eating pattern. It is believed that they provide benefits for people with and at risk for diabetes and heart disease.”

**Fish and seafood can be enjoyed frequently in the Mediterranean eating pattern.** Include these foods in your diet at least twice a week or more often. Consuming fish even as little as one time a week promotes total body wellness and can have positive health benefits. And in addition to omega-3s, seafood contains essential nutrients like zinc, potassium, selenium, iodine, and vitamins A and D. There are

many options in this category, including salmon, grouper, cod, sea bass, swordfish, tuna, turbot, squid, and shrimp.

**Get moderate amounts of poultry, eggs, cheese, and yogurt.** Eating poultry and dairy on a daily to weekly basis is recommended in the Mediterranean diet. Chicken and turkey are good sources of protein and provide a relatively low amount of fat compared to many meats. Eggs contain a variety of vitamins and minerals, and their high protein content makes you feel full and satisfied longer.

Finally, milk and milk products contain a healthful dose of animal protein along with other nutrients such as calcium, vitamins B2 and B12, potassium, and magnesium. **Eat meats less often.** “Meat should be eaten only on occasion,” says Riolo. “Goat, sheep, and beef fat (as well as that of other ruminants) contains about equal parts of saturated and monosaturated fat, with only a small quantity of polyunsaturated fat. When you do choose to eat a serving of meat, make sure it is surrounded with plenty of plant-based foods and crunchy salads, so you do not fill up on meat alone and miss out on the nutrients that the other ingredients have to offer.”

Save desserts for special occasions. Sugar was historically expensive in the Mediterranean region; therefore, fruit was often eaten at the end of a meal. This remains a better choice for everyone today. But when the occasion calls for something extra, simple, straightforward homestyle desserts are meant to provide a sweet end to a healthful meal. Just make sure that sugary desserts remain an occasional treat and not one you enjoy every day.

Here's a recipe from the book:

## ✂ Moroccan Couscous with Vegetable Tajine ✂

Tajines are dishes named after the vessel in which they are cooked. A tajin (with emphasis on the first syllable) is the word for a clay pot in Arabic. In Morocco, the word is pronounced ta-jine (with emphasis on the second syllable), and it refers to a clay pot with a cone-shaped lid in which such dishes are baked. Clay-pot cooking is great because it requires very little cooking oil to produce a great deal of flavor, making it a healthier cooking method. Also, seven is considered a lucky number in Moroccan culture, so seven vegetables are used in this dish. This recipe is strictly vegetarian, but in Morocco, meat is usually included.



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| 5 tsp extra-virgin olive oil, divided  | 1/2 lb artichoke hearts   |
| 2 yellow onions (about 8 oz total), finely chopped   | 1/2 lb zucchini, peeled, cut in half lengthwise, then cut crosswise into 2- or 3-inch fry-like wedges |
| 3/4 tsp unrefined sea salt, divided  | 1/2 lb eggplant, cut into 2- or 3-inch fry-like wedges  |
| Freshly ground black pepper, to taste  | 1/2 lb potatoes, peeled and cut into 2- or 3-inch fry-like wedges                                     |
| 1/2 tsp saffron  | 1/2 lb sweet potatoes, peeled and cut into 2- or 3-inch fry-like wedges                               |
| 1 tsp turmeric   | 1 cinnamon stick  |
| 2 cups boiling vegetable stock   | 1 cup whole-wheat couscous, or 2 cups cooked quinoa   |
| 1 lb carrots, peeled, cut in half lengthwise, then cut crosswise into 2- or 3-inch fry-like wedges |   |
| 1/2 lb turnips, peeled and cut into 2- or 3-inch fry-like wedges                                   |   |
- Heat 1 tsp olive oil in a large, heavy pot over medium heat. Add onions and sauté until translucent (about 5 minutes).
- Add 1/4 tsp salt, pepper, saffron, and turmeric. Stir to combine. Pour in boiling vegetable stock and stir.
- Add all of the vegetables, cinnamon stick, and enough water to cover 3/4 of the vegetables, and stir. Increase heat to high, and bring to a boil, uncovered. Reduce heat to medium-low, and simmer for 45 minutes until vegetables are very tender and have broken down. (Skip this step if using cooked quinoa.)
- Ten minutes before tajine is finished, bring 1-1/4 cups water, 3 tsp olive oil, and 1/2 tsp salt to a boil in a medium saucepan over high heat. Take saucepan off heat, add couscous, stir, and cover with lid. Let stand for 5-10 minutes. Remove lid, fluff with fork, and stir in 1 tsp olive oil. Serve couscous in a large, shallow dish next to the tajine. When tajine is finished, remove cinnamon stick. Serve warm with 1/2 cup couscous or quinoa.
- This dish is vegan. Makes 8 servings. Serving Size: 1 1/2 cups. Prep Time: 10 minutes, plus 10 minutes resting time for couscous. Cook Time: 50 minutes**
- Calories: 200. Calories from Fat: 35. Total Fat: 4.0 g. Saturated Fat: 0.5 g. Trans Fat: 0.0 g. Cholesterol: 0 mg. Sodium: 310 mg. Potassium: 590 mg. Total Carbohydrate: 39 g. Dietary Fiber: 9 g. Sugars: 8 g. Protein: 6 g. Phosphorus: 95 mg.**

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Don't forget to embrace the Mediterranean lifestyle too.

More than just an eating pattern, the Mediterranean diet incorporates a lifestyle that further promotes health and wellness. For example, every country and culture in the Mediterranean has its own way of encouraging people to eat together, focus on family life, and stay active. People enjoy shared meals and spend time with loved ones. They also prioritize exercise to stay healthy. Try to incorporate these activities into your own life. Take time to prepare healthy homecooked meals. Eat alongside friends, coworkers, or family members.



And make time to go for walks, go to the gym, or get active in other ways. “Healthy food is essential for your wellness and longevity, but when prepared the right way, it becomes one of life’s greatest pleasures,” concludes Riolo. “The Mediterranean diet delivers on both fronts. You’ll get the nutrition your body needs and all the flavor and satisfaction you crave.”

SOURCE: Amy Riolo. Excerpted from The Mediterranean Diabetes Cookbook, 2nd Edition: A Flavorful, Heart-Healthy Approach to Cooking (American Diabetes Association, May 2019, ISBN: 978-1-580-40702-1, \$22.95)

Starting a Mediterranean Pantry

A well-stocked pantry saves time, money, and stress when you’re ready to cook. And most importantly, it encourages you to eat healthfully. This essential checklist contains all the ingredients you’ll need to prepare delicious and nutritious Mediterranean-inspired meals.

The following items are categorized by where they are found in grocery stores.

BAKING

- ☐ Active dry yeast
- ☐ Agave nectar
- ☐ Almond extract
- ☐ Baking powder
- ☐ Baking soda
- ☐ Cocoa powder, unsweetened
- ☐ Cornmeal
- ☐ Cornstarch
- ☐ Flour, all-purpose, unbleached; barley; bread; chickpea; semolina; spelt; whole-wheat; whole-wheat pastry
- ☐ Polenta
- ☐ Salt, kosher
- ☐ Sea salt, unrefined
- ☐ Sugar, natural
- ☐ Vanilla extract

BEANS AND LEGUMES

- ☐ Black beans, canned, reduced-sodium
- ☐ Cannellini beans, canned, reduced-sodium
- ☐ Chickpeas, canned, low-sodium
- ☐ Lentils (brown), canned or dried, no-salt-added

HERBES DE PROVENCE (Dried)

- ☐ Basil
- ☐ Lavender
- ☐ Marjoram
- ☐ Oregano
- ☐ Rosemary
- ☐ Sage
- ☐ Tarragon
- ☐ Thyme

ITALIAN SPECIALTY

- ☐ Anchovy fillets, packed in olive oil
- ☐ Artichoke hearts, canned
- ☐ Bread crumbs, plain

- ☐ Capers, packed in water
- ☐ Espresso coffee
- ☐ Ladyfingers
- ☐ Olives, green, black, Kalamata, Niçoise, and Gaeta
- ☐ Roasted red peppers, jar
- ☐ Tomato paste
- ☐ Tomato purée
- ☐ Tomatoes, canned, low-sodium (diced and fire-roasted)
- ☐ Tuna, canned, packed in water

MISCELLANEOUS

- ☐ Dijon mustard
- ☐ Garlic
- ☐ Granola, low-fat, almond
- ☐ Honey

NUTS AND DRIED FRUIT

- ☐ Almonds, blanched
- ☐ Chestnuts, jar, whole, roasted or steamed
- ☐ Dates
- ☐ Pine nuts
- ☐ Pistachios, shelled
- ☐ Raisins
- ☐ Walnuts

OILS AND VINEGARS

- ☐ Corn or vegetable oil, expeller-pressed
- ☐ Nonstick cooking spray
- ☐ Olive oil, extra-virgin
- ☐ Vinegar, apple cider, balsamic, white, distilled
- ☐ Bulgur wheat
- ☐ Couscous
- ☐ Orzo
- ☐ Quinoa
- ☐ Rice, arborio, basmati, medium-grain, wild
- ☐ Whole-wheat pasta, spaghetti, penne rigate

SPICES AND SEEDS

- ☐ Allspice
- ☐ Anise seeds
- ☐ Caraway seeds
- ☐ Cayenne pepper
- ☐ Chili powder
- ☐ Cinnamon and cinnamon sticks
- ☐ Cloves, whole & ground
- ☐ Coriander, ground
- ☐ Crushed red pepper

- ☐ Cumin
- ☐ Fennel seeds
- ☐ Flaxseeds
- ☐ Ginger, ground
- ☐ Green cardamom, ground and pods
- ☐ Juniper berries
- ☐ Mint
- ☐ Nutmeg
- ☐ Paprika
- ☐ Peppercorns
- ☐ Saffron
- ☐ Seafood seasoning
- ☐ Sesame seeds
- ☐ Sumac
- ☐ Turmeric
- ☐ Za’atar

STOCKS

- ☐ Chicken stock, reduced-sodium
- ☐ Vegetable stock, reduced-sodium

ITEMS FOR THE FRIDGE (Use local & organic if possible)

- ☐ Carrots
- ☐ Celery
- ☐ Cheese, Parmesan, Romano, mozzarella, feta, and goat
- ☐ Eggs
- ☐ Fresh Seasonal Produce
- ☐ Herbs, fresh
- ☐ Lemons
- ☐ Lettuces, assorted
- ☐ Milk, skim
- ☐ Onions
- ☐ Potatoes
- ☐ Shallots
- ☐ Sweet potatoes
- ☐ Yogurt, plain, fat-free

ITEMS FOR THE FREEZER

- While I prefer fresh food whenever possible, a well-stocked freezer can help when you are short on time. In terms of nutrition, frozen items (without high-fat ingredients or excess sodium) are often a better option than takeout and delivery items, which can sabotage a healthy lifestyle plan.
- ☐ Chicken breasts, boneless, skinless
  - ☐ Fish fillets
  - ☐ Phyllo dough
  - ☐ Vegetables, frozen