The Mediterranean eating pattern is followed by the 22 counties surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. It has been increasingly heralded as one of the healthiest diets worldwide, and in 2015 it was finally recommended by the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, published jointly by the United States Departments of Agriculture and Health and Human Services, after thorough review of the decades of research by leading nutrition scientists.

What Is the Mediterranean Diet and Why Is It So Healthy?

Research shows these advantages of following the Med eating pattern:

- Live a longer life
- Fewer strokes and heart attacks
- Better cognition; less risk for Alzheimer’s and depression
- Reduced allergies
- Reduction of certain cancers
- Reduced incidence of type 2 diabetes and better blood glucose control
- Less childhood obesity
- Low saturated fats (less than 7 to 8 percent of total energy)

- Nuts (e.g., walnuts, almonds, hazelnuts; high in heart-healthy poly- and monounsaturated fats): 1 ounce per day
- Fish (e.g., salmon, sardines, tuna; high in omega-3 fats): 4-ounce serving two times per week, as recommended by the American Heart Association

Spreads

Another way the Mediterranean diet enhances nutrition is by including plant-based “spreads” instead of deli or processed meats with butter, margarine, or mayonnaise. One spread is olive tapenade, a finely chopped olive-based mixture that can be made from minced ripe olives or green olives.
Fava is a dish made from pureed cooked yellow split peas or fava beans. This common side dish at meals is passed in small bowls as you would pass butter.

A dish called eggplant salad, served in Greece and Turkey, is actually a dip of mashed or pureed roasted eggplant with olive oil and seasonings. A similar food in Arabic countries is referred to as Baba Ghanouj, though it frequently includes tomato and onion. These spreads add nutrients and fiber to the meal while limiting solid fats.

A variety of plant-based spreads are used with whole-grain breads, crackers, and barley rusk (slices of dried barley bread), which are very popular in the Mediterranean.

Healthy Fats
As a percentage of calories, the fat content of the Mediterranean diet varies from 25 to 40 percent depending on the geographical region. This would qualify as a low- to moderate-fat diet. Current research shows that this is a beneficial level of fat, adding fullness and satiety to a meal. In Mediterranean counties, more olive oil is consumed, whereas Americans generally eat more saturated fat from animal sources. Olive oil has a variety of fatty acid types making up the oil, mostly monounsaturated. This fits with the current U.S. Dietary Guidelines to consume less than 10 percent saturated fat. Other foods that contribute to healthy fats include nuts, seeds, avocados, fish, and seafood.

**Budget-Friendly Tips to Shop the Mediterranean Way**
Some may think it is more expensive to eat the Mediterranean way. However, consider the following advice to curb your spending and boost your nutrition and taste.

**Produce Purchasing**
- Shop farmers markets at the end of the day for best deals; freeze (or can) extras.
- Try canned vegetables with no added salt when these vegetables are not in season.
- Buy plain frozen fruits or vegetables (no added salt, sugar, or sauces) when not in season. Stock up on specials.
- More savings: Limit juice and juice drinks.

**Protein Foods—Smart Buys**
- Buy seafood in cans, pouches, or in plain frozen 3- to 4-ounce portions.
- Buy dried or canned beans, peas, and lentils with no added salt, or rinse them well (1/2 cup equals 2-ounce protein portion). They’re high in fiber to fill you up.
- More savings: Purchase plain nuts in bulk and serve 1-ounce portions. Nuts are also high in fiber.
- Buy eggs 18 per carton; compared with a dozen, this is usually better buy.
- More savings: Purchase beef, pork, and poultry less often (i.e., have more meatless meals); this will also reduce intake of saturated fat and calories.

**Dairy and Snacks**
- Try bean and lentil spreads with carrot chips, celery, pitas, or leftover dried whole-grain bread or bagels.
- Buy hard cheese or feta/goat cheese; a 1-ounce portion is 1 serving of dairy.
- Try savory or sweet yogurt dips; buy plain Greek yogurt in quarts and add spices or fruit.
- More savings: Purchase fewer low-nutrient, high-priced snacks such as sweetened individual yogurts, potato chips, pretzels, and special crackers.
- More savings: Purchase fresh produce in season at local

**Fats and Sweets**
- Use olive oil or non-extra virgin for cooking, and extra virgin only for noncooking (e.g., salad dressings, dips).
- Try canola oil for baking or reduce olive oil by one-quarter.
- Eat fruit for dessert.
- More savings: Purchase and/or prepare cakes, cookies, pies, candy, ice cream less often, serving them for special occasions only.

**Drinks**
- Buy and use a reusable water bottle.
- Purchase coffee and tea in larger amounts, not single-serve.
- Make your own fruited water, coffee, and iced tea to reduce sugar intake.
- If drinking wine, limit to 5 ounces per day for women and 10 ounces per day for men.
- More savings: Limit soda, sweet teas, sports drinks, energy drinks, mixed alcohol drinks, and flavored coffee drinks.

**Additional Tips**
- Plant a home or community garden, or grow produce in pots.
### Examine Your Choices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food Source</th>
<th>What I buy</th>
<th>What I plan to buy/change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hamburger on bun</td>
<td>Protein and carbohydrate</td>
<td>Ground beef and white bun</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My goal: Eat 3 to 4 ounces each of fish and beans/lentils twice a week.

farmers markets, farm stands, and community supported agriculture.

- Shop store brands.
- Choose more nutrient-dense foods, and buy foods and drinks that are high in saturated fat and sugar less often. Compare Nutrition Facts labels.
- Shop for recommended portions per person (e.g., 3 to 4 ounces of seafood twice per week).
- Shop sales and buy in bulk if food won’t spoil in 1 to 2 weeks.
- Plan meals and snacks and use leftovers in meal planning.
- Use online and store coupons and ads as well as manufacturers-only coupons.
- Eat out less and use prepared foods sparingly.

### Sources


### Curried Lentil Spread or Dip

Serving size: Makes 6 servings

**INGREDIENTS**

1 14-ounce can lentils, including liquid
1 tsp ground coriander
½ red bell pepper, chopped
1 clove garlic, minced
1 Tbsp curry powder
¼ tsp ground black pepper
1 tsp ground cumin
1 Tbsp olive oil

**DIRECTIONS**

Puree all the ingredients in a blender or food processor. Serve with dippers or use as sandwich spread.

Tips: Add more lemon juice to liven up flavor; add more olive oil if bean mixture is too stiff.

**NUTRITIONAL FACTS**

Per ½ cup: 180 calories, 13g fat, 2g sat. fat, 260mg sodium, 2g carb, 13g protein.

Source: Rayna Cooper, Penn State Extension Mediterranean Cuisine Comes to You program.