

Eat Smart to a Healthy Heart



Healthy eating starts with healthy food choices. A healthy diet can help reduce your risk of developing coronary heart disease and stop you gaining weight, reducing your risk of diabetes and high blood pressure. Fad diets should be avoided as they may not provide the balance of nutrients you need and represent only a short-term dietary change. Unlike fad diets, the DASH diet and the Mediterranean Diet offers a scientifically researched, affordable, balanced and health-promoting lifestyle choice in combination with moderate exercise and not smoking.

The DASH Diet to Lower Blood Pressure¹



As its name implies, the DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) eating plan is designed to help you manage blood pressure and it has been rated the best diet for overall health and wellness for the past five years in a row. Research has shown that the DASH diet

can reduce blood pressure within two to four weeks (by 6 mmHg systolic and 3 mmHg diastolic). After this initial reduction the blood pressure is maintained rather than reduced further. As well as being a proven way to help lower blood pressure and cholesterol, DASH has also been shown to reduce the risk of many diseases that are linked to high blood pressure (hypertension) such as stroke and heart disease. Studies also show it may reduce the risk of particular types of cancer, such as colon.

It emphasises a good intake of fruit and vegetables, low fat milk and milk products (dairy), choosing wholegrain foods, poultry, fish and nuts and limits saturated fat, red meat, sweets and sugary drinks. The DASH diet has a higher intake of potassium, calcium, magnesium and fibre. Saturated fat intake is lower than the typical Australian diet, and protein intake is higher. This may sound like a typical healthy diet, but it's worth noting that the daily fruit serves differ from the Australian Dietary Guidelines that recommend two serves of fruit a day compared with DASH that advocate four serves of fruit, plus five serves of vegetables a day. The Australian Dietary Guidelines also recommend two to four serves of lean red meat each week but on the DASH plan it's only once or twice a week.

Its restricted sodium levels mean DASH isn't suitable for people with low blood pressure, and its restricted red meat intake puts it off limits for women with high iron needs, such as when pregnant. Essentially, the diet is aimed at those with hypertension, defined as a blood pressure reading of 140/90 mmHg or greater or who have a family history of it. It's also important to note that DASH should be combined with 30 minutes of moderate to brisk exercise a day to positively impact your blood pressure in keeping with an overall healthy lifestyle.

An example of the DASH diet plan can be found on The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) website.¹

Eating the Mediterranean Way



The Mediterranean diet is based on the heart healthy eating style traditionally seen in countries on the Mediterranean coast such as Greece, Spain and Italy. It encourages a high intake of fruit and vegetables, nuts, legumes and whole grains and is a high fibre, nutrient rich diet. This eating style promotes a moderate to high intake of unsaturated fats, in particular olive oil, which provides antioxidants in addition to healthy fats. Low-fat dairy products, fish and poultry are consumed in low to moderate amounts, and little red meat is eaten. Eggs are consumed zero to four times a week. Red wine is also consumed in low to moderated amounts - although it does not encourage those who do not already drink to take up the habit.

More than half the fat calories in a Mediterranean diet come from monounsaturated fats (mainly from olive oil) which doesn't raise blood cholesterol levels the way saturated fat does. The incidence of heart disease and mortality rates in Mediterranean countries are lower than Australia. Strong research supports that following a Mediterranean-style diet is associated with lower risk factors for heart disease. One study that analysed medical and lifestyle data, including dietary habits, from 780 male firemen in the US found that those who stuck to a Mediterranean-style diet had a 43 percent lower chance of weight gain compared with those who didn't follow this type of diet.² Additionally, greater adherence to a Mediterranean diet was significantly associated with lower levels of LDL, or 'bad' cholesterol. Research has also shown that following a Mediterranean diet can reduce the chance of developing conditions such as Type 2 Diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity, some cancers, Parkinson's disease and Alzheimer's disease.³

Bring a taste of the Mediterranean into your diet by eating more fruit, vegetables, pulses, lentils and fish. Combine this with cutting down on fatty and sugary snacks and using unsaturated oils instead of butter. Taking this balanced approach will help look after your heart and your waistline, with no need to scrimp on taste.

Which Diet is Right for You?

Both the DASH diet and the Mediterranean diet eating plans have proven health benefits. Deciding which to follow depends on your preferences and what you're trying to accomplish in terms of health. For example, if you're trying to get enough calcium without resorting to supplements, you may find DASH a little easier to follow. However, if you are lactose intolerant, the Mediterranean diet may be a better choice. Here is a quick summary of how these two healthy eating plans compare.⁴

DASH		MEDITERRANEAN	
			
FOOD GROUP	DAILY SERVINGS	FOOD GROUP	RECOMMENDATION
Whole grains	7 to 8	Whole grains, vegetables, fruits, seeds, olive oil, beans, nuts, legumes	Base every meal on these foods
Vegetables	4 to 5	Fish, seafood	Eat at least twice a week
Fruits	4 to 5	Poultry, eggs, yogurt, cheese	Eat moderate portions daily to weekly
Dairy, low-fat or nonfat	2 to 3	Meats and sweets	Eat less often than other foods
Lean meats, poultry, fish	2 or fewer	Wine	Drink in moderation
Nuts, seeds, dry beans	4 to 5 per week		
Fats and oils	2 to 3		
Sweets	5 per week		

Content Sources:

1. The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP). *DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) diet to prevent and control hypertension*. Retrieved from: <https://www.racgp.org.au/FSDEDEV/media/documents/Clinical%20Resources/HANDI/Dash-diet.pdf>.
2. Korre M., Sotos-Prieto M. and Kales S.N. (2017). Survival Mediterranean Style: Lifestyle Changes to Improve the Health of the US Fire Service. *Front Public Health*, 5:331.
3. Romagnolo D.F. and Selmin O.I. (2017). Mediterranean Diet and Prevention of Chronic Diseases. *Nutr Today*, 52(5):208–222.
4. Havard Health. *DASH or Mediterranean: Which diet is better for you?* Retrieved from: <https://www.health.harvard.edu/diet-and-weight-loss/dash-or-mediterranean-which-diet-is-better-for-you>.