



# nutrition

by Jamie Richards

## The Mediterranean diet – just what should you be eating?

The Mediterranean diet really is the buzz trend right now. It must surely be one of the most commonly used terms in nutrition these days, having successfully crossed the void between complementary nutrition and conventional medicine. Extensively studied, the list of health benefits is impressive – reduced risk of cancer, reduced age-related memory decline, improved weight loss, reduced cholesterol, lowered risk of heart disease and more recently with improved mood and reduced depression. This is all good stuff and there is little doubt about the benefits to be gained from adopting the principles of a Mediterranean diet.

So just why is the Mediterranean diet so good and what can we take out of it to benefit our own health and that of our families? The top preventable diseases in western society are smoking tobacco, drinking too much alcohol, high blood pressure, obesity, physical inactivity, high salt intake and omega 3 fatty acid deficiencies. Other than smoking, the Mediterranean diet broadly addresses all these issues. It even allows for a small glass of red wine or two with your main meal. It's not a greatly restrictive diet, you don't have to count calories and, with little skill in the kitchen, the results taste fantastic. Great, I hear you say, sounds like the one for me, where do I sign up?

However, there's a problem. On the one hand, we're encouraged to adopt this diet, but as we enter our supermarkets the reality of it hits home. In amongst the piles of sugar, salt and fat laden products, where do we start?

Successive governments have allowed and encouraged the relentless surge of the convenience food industry. We can't rely on them to change now, can we? Right now, with the emergence of the Mediterranean diet, there is a real opportunity for our government to send out a strong message of intent by dramatically cutting the salt, fat and sugar content of convenience foods. Imagine the biggest health shake up this country has ever known, the prime minister rolls up his sleeves, clears our supermarket shelves of convenience foods and fills them with ingredients that fit the Mediterranean diet plan. GP surgeries are fitted with demo kitchens and, much like the Spanish, we're all encouraged to sit down and eat with our families and then take a siesta. ... I can dream can't I?

Besides, is following the Mediterranean diet really all we need to do in the UK to put an end to diet-related illness? A one size fits all diet for the 21st century? I'd argue not. If only life were that simple. It is a sunny place to start, but there are other factors to consider here. As food becomes scarcer in the world, local

food will undoubtedly become far more important to us. What's growing in our fields will increasingly dictate what's on our plates in the not too distant future, not what they're eating for lunch in Tuscany. Our climate also plays an important part. Is a fresh raw salad of any use to us on a cold, damp January evening when only a hearty broth will really do the trick? And let's not forget that we are all individuals with different tastes and needs.

Having said that, we do need to do something and the Mediterranean diet would be a huge leap in the right direction. It would take us a step back to times when fresh food preparation was part of our everyday lives and involved imagination and a large measure of frugality. I think mostly it is the principles of the Mediterranean diet that we could adopt and adapt.

### For starters here's my own adaptation:

Walk to and from the shops. It's good exercise and encourages you to buy locally.

Buy only free ranging, grass fed meat and dairy products (including butter). They are higher in the health giving essential fatty acids like omega 3.

Use extra virgin olive oil in cooking and food preparation, and use it liberally.

Avoid buying processed foods, especially baked goods, breakfast cereals, meats and ready meals. They're laden with salt, sugar and saturated fats.

Ensure half of your plate/serving contains a wide variety of non-starchy vegetables.

Experiment using plenty of herbs and spices in your cooking. These add flavour and improve digestion.

Take plenty of time to enjoy your food with friends and family and chew properly. Eating in a relaxed environment improves digestion and 'transit time'.

Lastly, and to avoid finishing an article with the words 'transit time', enjoy a small glass of red wine with your evening meal. Bon Appétit!

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