



Weill Cornell Medical College



Women's Nutrition Connection

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A Mediterranean-style Diet May Help Protect Brain Function

Following a Mediterranean-style dietary pattern has been linked with many health benefits, including lower risks of heart disease, stroke, and diabetes. Now, research has found an association between a Mediterranean-style diet and better brain function.

According to a study published in the March 2011 issue of the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*

(*AJCN*), study participants whose diets most closely adhered to a Mediterranean dietary pattern experienced slower rates of cognitive decline than those who didn't eat Mediterranean-style.

"The Mediterranean meal pattern emphasizes consuming a variety of fruit, vegetables, legumes, olive oil, and fish, moderate amounts of non-refined grains and wine, and less red meat and meat products. Researchers theorize this dietary pattern may help decrease stress and inflammation throughout the body, which may protect brain function," explains Georgia Giannopoulos, RD, CDN, CNSC, a dietitian at Weill Cornell Medical Center.



Image: Thinkstock

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for recipe ...

Putting it into practice.

Giannopoulos provides the following tips to help you move your dietary pattern toward a Mediterranean-style diet and away from a traditional Western diet:

Diet details. In the *AJCN* study, the participants' diets were ranked to determine how similar they were to an average diet reported by Greek residents. For example, the average weekly Greek diet included 33 or more servings of vegetables, 22 or more servings of fruit, 6 or more servings of legumes, nuts and beans, 6 or more servings of fish, 7 or more servings of olive oil, and one or fewer servings of red meat. Study participants whose diets were closest in composition to the average Greek diet scored higher on tests that measured cognitive functioning than participants whose diets were least similar to the Greek diet.

- ✓ Eat five or more servings of fruit and vegetables per day; choose a colorful array for a variety of nutrients. Include at least one fruit or vegetable with your breakfast, lunch and dinner, and two snacks (for example, an apple with peanut butter, or carrots and celery with hummus or an ounce of low-fat cheese).
- ✓ Keep staples of the Mediterranean-style meal plan, such as extra-virgin olive oil, fruits and vegetables, unsalted nuts, and beans and lentils, in your pantry and/or refrigerator so you have healthful options

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conveniently at hand. Keep a stash of fruit, vegetables, fish and skinless chicken breasts in your freezer, too.

- ✓ When creating meals, aim for a nice balance of fresh ingredients. For example, have baked or broiled salmon (see recipe below), a mixed salad tossed with a variety of vegetables and extra-virgin olive oil, a side of couscous or brown rice, a glass of red wine, and fruit and nuts for dessert.
- ✓ Opt for non-refined, whole grains, such as oatmeal, 100-percent whole-grain bread, and bulgur wheat, instead of refined grains, such as processed cereals, white bread, white rice, and white pasta.
- ✓ Test your green thumb; plant a small herb garden by your window. Oregano, basil, and mint add a burst of flavor to food without the sodium.

The role of olive oil. Some people have incorrectly assumed that simply switching from other dietary fats and oils to olive oil provides the same health benefits as the Mediterranean diet.

“While olive oil is packed with heart-healthy fats, and it is one key feature of the Mediterranean meal pattern, there are several other key foods, such as vegetables, non-refined grains, and plant proteins, that form the core of this eating pattern, and consuming a well-balanced variety of these foods will provide the most health benefits,” says Giannopoulos. 🍷



WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT OLIVE OIL

All types of olive oil have healthful nutrients, including monounsaturated fats, and polyphenols, which are antioxidants. Extra-virgin olive oil is the least processed form of olive oil, so it provides the most nutrients, with virgin olive oil coming in second. “Light” olive oil has the same amount of calories and fat as extra-virgin olive oil. It has gone through more processing, so it has a lighter color and milder flavor, making it a popular choice for baking.

Store olive oil in a tightly sealed glass bottle in a dark, cool, dry place to maintain its flavor and nutrition quality; light, heat and moisture causes oil to oxidize, which can decrease its nutritional value and cause the oil to go rancid (spoil) more quickly. Buy oil in small quantities and use it within a few months of purchase. Save the more expensive, more flavorful olive oils for dipping sauces and salad dressings; heating olive oil causes it to lose some of its flavor.

While olive oil is a healthier choice than many other fats, such as butter, it is still a fat; it contains about 120 calories per tablespoon, so use it in moderation.

Mediterranean-style Salmon

2 salmon fillets, 3½ oz each
4 tsp olive oil
2 tsp lemon juice

½ tsp dried oregano (or ½ Tbs fresh)
½ tsp dried basil (or ½ Tbs fresh)
½ c grape or cherry tomatoes, quartered

2 Tbs kalamata or black olives, sliced
1 oz feta cheese, crumbled
Freshly ground black pepper, to taste

1. Preheat oven to 375° Fahrenheit.
2. In a small bowl, whisk together olive oil, lemon juice, oregano, basil, and pepper.
3. Wash and pat dry salmon fillets. Place in a shallow baking pan coated with non-stick cooking spray.
4. Spoon half of the olive oil mixture over the fillets; place pan in the oven for 5 minutes.
5. Remove pan from oven, spread tomatoes, olives and feta cheese evenly over fillets, and drizzle the remaining olive oil mixture over the fillets.
6. Return to the oven for another 5 to 7 minutes, or until salmon is cooked through and flakes easily with a fork. If the salmon was cooked with the skin on, remove the skin before eating.

Yield: 2 servings

Nutrition information per serving:

342 calories
23 g protein
26 g total fat
6.5 g saturated fat
3 g carbohydrates
1 g fiber
67 mg cholesterol
281 mg sodium