

# Eating for a healthy heart for adults: the Mediterranean diet

A healthy diet and keeping physically active can help to reduce the risk of developing heart disease and having a heart attack. The diet and lifestyle changes to help reduce the risks include: Managing your weight, not drinking too much alcohol, getting more active and following a Mediterranean style diet. Research has shown that the Mediterranean diet can also reduce risk of developing problems such as type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, raised cholesterol and raised triglycerides (these are types of fats found in blood), which are all risk factors for heart disease.



## Managing your weight

Maintaining a healthy weight helps to reduce the strain on your heart. It can also help improve lipid levels by increasing the good cholesterol and reducing the bad cholesterol in your blood. If you need to lose weight, consider starting with small changes such as reducing your portion sizes.

For more information visit Better Health at: <https://www.nhs.uk/better-health/>



## Not drinking too much alcohol

Too much alcohol can damage the heart, increase blood pressure and lead to weight gain. It is important to keep alcohol to moderation. If you drink, you should stay within safe limits and not binge drink. Current NHS advice is that men and women are advised not to drink more than 14 units a week on a regular basis and to spread drinking over 3 or more days if you regularly drink as much as 14 units a week. If you want to cut down, try to have several drink-free days each week.

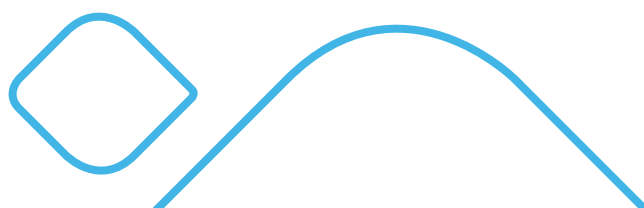
The number of units in a drink is based on the size of the drink, as well as its alcohol strength.

**For example: a pint of strong lager contains 3 units of alcohol, whereas the same volume of lower-strength lager has just over 2 units. One standard glass of wine (175ml, ABV 12%) has just over 2 units and a large glass (250ml) 3 units.**

**14 units is equivalent to 6 pints of average-strength beer or ~10 small glasses (125ml) of lower-strength wine.**

A useful tool to calculate alcohol units and calories can be found at:

<https://account.drinkaware.co.uk/understand-your-drinking/unit-calculator>



---

## Regular exercise

- **Aim to build up to at least 30 minutes** (can be 3 x 10 minute sessions) of moderate intensity physical activity five or more days a week (e.g. swimming, walking, cycling, gardening, climbing the stairs). Moderate intensity means breathing slightly harder and becoming warmer than normal. Stop exercising, if you feel pain or discomfort. For more information visit:

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/829884/3-physical-activity-for-adults-and-older-adults.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/829884/3-physical-activity-for-adults-and-older-adults.pdf)

## Following a Mediterranean-style diet

The British Heart Foundation state that a typical Mediterranean diet has common elements such as lots of vegetables, fruits, beans, cereals and cereal products, for example wholegrain bread, pasta and brown rice.

It also contains moderate amounts of fish, white meat and some low-fat dairy produce and, in some cases, nuts, as well as smaller amounts of red meat and sweet desserts. Unsaturated fats such as olive oil are used instead of saturated fats such as butter,

For more information watch the BHF short video that provides an overview of the Mediterranean diet.

<https://www.bhf.org.uk/informationsupport/heart-matters-magazine/nutrition/mediterranean-diet>

Here are some easy steps to help you follow a Mediterranean-style diet:



**Enjoy a wide variety of fruit and vegetables:** These are packed with vitamins, minerals and antioxidants (substances that help prevent cell damage). These can protect your heart. Include a variety of vegetables, fruit, salads and pulses such as lentils and beans in your daily diet and include in all meals.



**Aim to eat at least 5 portions each day:** A portion is a medium sized banana, apple, orange or pear, a slice of melon or pineapple, 2 kiwi fruits or satsumas, a handful of grapes or berries, a small handful (30g) of dried fruit, 1 small glass of fruit juice (juice counts as 1 portion only per day), a small bowl of salad, 1 standard tomato or 3 tablespoons of cooked vegetables or beans. Fresh, frozen and tinned all count. If tinned, choose fruit in water or natural fruit juice.



**Eat more fish:** Omega 3 fatty acids found in oily types of fish, helps to keep the heart healthy and protect against a heart attack. Oily fish include sardines, pilchards, mackerel, herring, trout, salmon, kippers and fresh tuna (not tinned tuna). If you dislike oily fish, try vegetarian sources such as walnuts, linseeds, soya and soya products and green leafy vegetables.



**Try going meat free once a week** The Mediterranean diet includes more fish and pulses and less meat. Choosing fish, beans and pulses is a good way to increase your protein.



**Try to eat 2 portions of fish a week, one of which should be oily:** A portion is about 140g (e.g. a small fillet of fresh fish or a small tin of oily fish). If you have had a heart attack it is no longer necessary to increase your intake of oily fish to 2-4 portions/week (for the sole purpose of preventing a further heart attack). Pregnant women should limit their intake to 2 portions of oily fish per week.



**Reduce your intake of unhealthy fats:** All types of fats are high in calories and should be limited if you are trying to lose weight. Some fats e.g. saturated fat, also raise bad cholesterol levels. This is found in fatty meats, full fat dairy foods, and in many processed foods such as ready-made meals, pastries, biscuits and cakes. Replace saturated fats such as butter, coconut oil and lard with unsaturated oils from plants and seeds such as olive and rapeseed oil. This can help to lower your cholesterol levels.



**Mono-unsaturated fat** found in olive oil, rapeseed oil and avocados helps to lower bad blood cholesterol and increase good cholesterol, and is the best type of fat for your heart.

**Polyunsaturated fat** found in oily fish and vegetable oils such as sunflower oil, and plant sterol and stanol-enriched foods and drinks (found in certain spreads and yogurt style drinks) can also help lower bad cholesterol.

Suggestions to reduce intake of unhealthy fats include:

- Use spreads, margarines and cooking oils in moderation. Choose those that are made from olive oil, rapeseed oil, sunflower oil, corn oil, soya oil or ground nut oil.
- Trim all visible fat from meat and remove the skin from chicken and turkey before cooking.
- Limit your intake of high fat foods such as sausages, pies, pastries, cheese, crisps and cakes.
- Choose lower fat milk and dairy foods such as skimmed, 1% and semi-skimmed milk, low fat yoghurts and reduced fat cheeses
- Check food labels and avoid those containing hydrogenated fat, lard, suet, butter, cream, coconut and palm oil.
- Check vegan and vegetarian meal choices too as these can contain high amounts of coconut oil or cream.



**Skip the salt:** Eating too much salt can raise blood pressure, which increases the risk of heart disease.

**Limit your salt intake to 6 grams of salt** which is approximately 1 teaspoon of salt (2.5g of sodium) a day or less. Most of the salt we consume is hidden in processed foods.

Suggestions to reduce your salt intake include:

- Use less salt in cooking and taste food first before adding salt.
- Experiment with herbs and spices to add flavour, such as pepper, lemon juice, mustard, garlic or vinegar.
- Check food labels for salt content: High is more than 1.5g salt (0.6g sodium) per 100g serving and Low is 0.3g salt (0.1g sodium) or less per 100g serving.
- Limit salty foods such as crisps, salted nuts, bacon, cheese, tinned and packet processed foods, ready meals and takeaway meals.



**Eat high fibre starchy foods:** All starchy foods like bread, rice, pasta, potatoes and breakfast cereals are suitable. Foods such as oats, baked beans and other pulses (peas, beans, lentils) contain soluble fibre which has a slight cholesterol-lowering effect, so try replacing some of the meat in meals with these foods. Try to base all your meals on wholegrain starchy carbohydrates such as wholegrain pasta, bread, cereals and rice.



### Need inspiration?

For more inspiration, the British Heart Foundation suggest you try swapping meals using their Mediterranean meals interactive link below:

<https://www.bhf.org.uk/information-support/heart-matters-magazine/nutrition/mediterranean-diet/mediterranean-meals-infographic>



### Healthy heart recipes

<https://www.bhf.org.uk/information-support/support/healthy-living/healthy-eating/recipe-finder?keyword=&tab=recipes&cuisine=mediterranean&run=1>



For further information: [www.food.gov.uk](http://www.food.gov.uk)

Contact details:

### Nutrition and Dietetic Services

Tel: (01225) 824398 (RUH)  
Tel: (01225) 833916 (St Martin's)

Royal United Hospitals Bath NHS Foundation Trust  
Combe Park, Bath, BA1 3NG 01225 428331 | [www.ruh.nhs.uk](http://www.ruh.nhs.uk)

Please contact the Patient Support and Complaints Team (PSCT) if you require this leaflet in a different format, or would like to feedback your experience of the hospital. Email [ruh-tr.psct@nhs.net](mailto:ruh-tr.psct@nhs.net) or telephone 01225 825656.

Date of publication: November 2023

Review : November 2026

Ref: RUH Meddiet /021 (DTT/013)

© Royal United Hospitals Bath NHS Foundation Trust.