

# 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.

## 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. Moderate drinking (e.g. 1-2 units of alcohol a day) can help protect the heart. If you drink, you should stay within safe limits, not binge drink and aim for two alcohol free days per week and no more than 14 units of alcohol a week. Avoid drinking more than 3 units in a 1-2 hour period. **1 unit is a small glass of wine (80mls), or ½ pint of beer, lager or cider, or a single pub measure of spirits.**

A good 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

There is evidence that following this diet has health benefits. This type of diet helps to reduce cholesterol and triglyceride levels, lower blood pressure and reduce your risk of heart disease and having a heart attack. Here are five 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 that can protect your heart. Include a variety of vegetables, fruit, salads and pulses such as lentils and beans in your daily diet.  
**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 (counts as 1 portion only), a small bowl of salad, 1 standard tomato or 3 tablespoons of cooked vegetables or beans. Fresh, frozen and tinned all count.
- **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 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 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.

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:

- Choose lower fat milk and dairy foods such as skimmed and semi-skimmed milk, low fat yoghurts and reduced fat cheeses.
- Use spreads, margarines and cooking oils in moderation. Choose ones 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.
- Check food labels and avoid those containing hydrogenated fat, lard, suet, butter, cream, coconut and palm oil.

➤ **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 takeaways.

➤ **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.

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

Contact details:

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