



the mediterranean diet

You don't need to follow a super-restrictive, calorie-counting diet plan to look and feel your best on your wedding day. Just do as the Italians do.

BY ALICE OGLETHORPE PHOTOGRAPH BY J.R. PHOTOGRAPHY »

Sure, the Mediterranean is home to amazing vacation destinations and stunning works of art, but it also happens to be where you'll find one of the world's healthiest diets. "There's such a different approach to food there," says Conner Middelmann-Whitney, a Boulder, Colorado-based nutrition coach and founder of Modern Mediterranean. "It's all about fresh, locally grown, seasonal food, cooked deliciously. And there also happens to be lots of research proving it's incredibly healthy." Sounds pretty good, right? Here's the cherry on top: Following a Mediterranean diet can also be the key to getting into better shape before your wedding day.

back to basics

Most people hear the word "diet" and automatically assume there's a list of approved and banned foods they're going to need to memorize, but the Mediterranean diet is surprisingly simple. It's made up of foods naturally found in that region, like fresh fish, vegetables, fruit, whole grains and olive oil.

VEGETABLES AND FRUIT These are the real stars of the Mediterranean diet and should be the central component of most of your meals. Don't read "fruit" and think "juice" though. Keep your apples, oranges, berries and other fruits whole so you get all the fiber without all the added sugar.

BEANS, LEGUMES AND NUTS This category contains sunflower and sesame seeds, peanut butter, almonds, kidney and garbanzo beans, lentils, split peas and a host of other delicious options.

WHOLE GRAINS This doesn't mean you pile a plate with spaghetti and top it with butter and salt (no matter how delicious that sounds). Make sure the grains are whole, like whole-wheat pasta, whole-wheat pita, couscous, quinoa and barley, and don't make them the largest percentage of your plate.

SEAFOOD "Fish is eaten a lot in this diet," says Amy Gannon, MEd, RD, LD, manager of the Cleveland Clinic's e-coaching program. "And the more you can eat fatty fish, like salmon, herring, mackerel and sardines, the better."

MEAT "While this is a heavily plant-based diet, it's not vegetarian," Middelmann-Whitney says. "Meat supplies iron, zinc, protein and other nutrients, but in the Mediterranean diet it's used as a flavoring or small part of the plate as opposed to a huge slab of steak with a little something on the side."

ANIMAL PROTEINS AND DAIRY "These are usually eaten in smaller amounts," Middelmann-Whitney says. "When it comes to dairy, it's often fermented, like yogurt and kefir, making it full of healthy probiotics."

FATS For this category, unsaturated fat is the way to go. Olive oil (preferably virgin or extra-virgin) is the main source of fat, but you can also have canola oil (and don't forget avocados!).



The components of the Mediterranean diet aren't eaten in the same quantities. "Think of it as being a pyramid," Gannon says. "The base [or largest section] is all of the plant-based foods: vegetables, fruit, olive oil, beans, nuts, seeds and legumes. On top of that is lean protein, specifically fish and seafood, since they are the animal protein of choice on this diet. Then, you should have a more moderate intake of dairy, eggs and other meat, like chicken. At the very top, in limited amounts, are red meat, processed food, added sugars and very high-fat dairy, like butter."

Then there's the alcohol question. You're engaged after all—won't you be able to celebrate? On this diet, the answer is yes. "You can have one drink per day—red wine, white wine, whatever—as long as it isn't made with a sugary mixer," Gannon says. "In fact, champagne is a pretty smart choice since the bubbles force you to drink more slowly and flutes tend to be on the smaller size." We'll toast to that!

What's unique about this diet is that it's not just about the food choices (although they are important). It's also about the way you eat that food. If you're used to scarfing down a sandwich while staring at your laptop or the television, that's going to change. "In the Mediterranean, people still gather around the table, sit down and eat together," says Nancy Harmon Jenkins, author of *Virgin Territory* and *The Four Seasons of Pasta*, which she coauthored with her daughter. "So you shouldn't just make a Mediterranean salad and mindlessly eat it while shooting off an email on your phone. To really follow this diet, plate your food, sit down, put away your phone, turn off your television and talk with your friends or family members." She stresses that you should "celebrate" the food you're eating and work on being really present in the moment, whether you're with friends or alone. >>

Not only will that make you enjoy your food more, it can also help you lose weight. Researchers from the United Kingdom found that people who were taught how to eat mindfully lost more weight over a six-month period than those who weren't.

The last component of the Mediterranean diet is the way you shop for your food. "Try to focus on buying local and seasonal foods as much as you can," Jenkins says. "The way I like to think of it is that you should spend more time shopping for your food than you do preparing it in the kitchen." If you have a farmers market, go there to find local produce, meat, dairy and eggs—that's the true Mediterranean way.

healthy fat

Consuming omega-3 fatty acids (found in fatty fish like salmon and mackerel) may improve your heart health and stave off depression.

why it's so healthy

Now the good part: how eating this way can make you healthier and get you feeling your best on your wedding day. "There are a lot of different diets strictly for weight loss, and there are other diets that are all about giving you optimal health, but this diet is about both," Gannon says. "You can follow it to drop a few extra pounds, but you're also going to reduce your risk of chronic diseases and feel energized and happy along the way."

What makes this diet so good for you? "Everything that is emphasized in the diet is a whole food, meaning it's full of nutrients, vitamins and antioxidants," Gannon says. "Most people in the US don't eat enough fruits and vegetables, but follow this diet and you'll increase how much fresh produce you're consuming." Here, the health benefits you could experience on a Mediterranean diet:

LOWER RISK OF CHRONIC DISEASES A study in the *New England Journal of Medicine* found that people who follow a Mediterranean diet have a lower risk of heart attack, stroke, type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

IMPROVED MOOD Researchers in Spain studied 15,000 people and found that those who followed the Mediterranean diet had a much lower risk of developing depression, possibly due to the high amounts of omega-3 fatty acids consumed on the diet.

WEIGHT LOSS A *New England Journal of Medicine* study notes that people following a Mediterranean diet lost more than three times as much weight as those following a low-fat diet.

It's this last point that might be the most interesting to you. How does a diet that's relatively high in fat help you *lose* weight? The fiber, protein and healthy fats are going to actually keep you full and satisfied, meaning you'll feel less inclined to reach for chips, cookies or candy throughout the day. "Vegetables, which make up the bulk of your meals, are high in nutrients and generally low in calories," Middelmann-Whitney says. It's a matter of volume: By filling your stomach with high-fiber fruits and veggies, you just won't feel as hungry. And because the foods won't spike your blood sugar and leave you hungry an hour later, you'll make it through the day with fewer snacks.

The Mediterranean diet is also incredibly easy to stick with. "Unlike other diets, you don't have to count calories, weigh out your portions or track points on a daily basis," Gannon says. "You quickly get into a great rhythm with it—and the food is so delicious that you can realistically stick with it in the long term. While it's natural to think about losing weight for one day, you should really focus on keeping it off and staying healthy for the rest of your life, which this diet will help you do."

Because the diet is inherently nutritious, just following the food guidelines will help you lose weight, especially if you've been eating lots of processed foods, desserts and fast foods. But there are also higher-calorie items on the diet, such as olive oil and nuts, and you could go overboard and eat more than you realized. So don't count calories, but do be conscious of the amount of higher-calorie foods you're eating. >>



have fun in the kitchen

Creating a mélange of delicious Mediterranean-style dishes on a daily basis may sound like a challenge, but we promise it's actually a lot of fun (and a great excuse to develop—or flex—your culinary muscles). “This diet is all about taking real foods and cooking them in your home the way your grandparents would,” Gannon says. “But that doesn't mean it's difficult! The dishes can be very simplistic and basic, so people who aren't that good in the kitchen can be very successful with it.”

How to do it? Don't get stressed about forcing yourself to like specific foods—instead, play around and find your own favorite flavors within the plan. A wide variety of foods are eaten in the Mediterranean—cuisines from France, Italy, Spain and Greece—so do a little exploring to find what works for you.

As with any eating plan, it's important to consider what you're going to eat ahead of time. That means three meals and a snack or two. “Yes, you can have a snack, but only eat as much as your body needs throughout the day,” Gannon says. “You'll need to work on asking yourself if you're truly hungry before you eat.”

For each meal and snack, think about combining a healthy carbohydrate, a little protein and plenty of vegetables or fruit. “For example, you could start the day with oatmeal topped with a little fruit, or avocado on whole wheat toast,” Gannon says. “Lunch could be some quinoa with a small piece of fish and roasted carrots, and dinner could be a huge salad with garbanzo beans, some sunflower seeds, poached chicken breast and an olive oil vinaigrette.” The same approach applies to snacks: Choose something heavy on produce with some healthy carbohydrates mixed in, like veggies and hummus, or Greek yogurt topped with chia seeds, fruit, nuts and cinnamon.

Finally, Jenkins says to remember to focus on the flavor of the food: “You aren't just boiling up a pot of spinach and dumping it on a plate—how boring is that! It's so important to let the true flavor of your wonderful food shine through.” She suggests steaming the spinach lightly so it still has lots of flavor and color, then chop it and sauté it with a little bit of sliced garlic and olive oil. Add a spritz of lemon juice and pair it with a piece of grilled halibut or brown rice and lentils. “Or, if a winter squash is more your thing, split it in half, take out the seeds, drizzle on olive oil and add garlic, chili pepper and salt to it,” Jenkins says. “Bake it at 375 degrees until it's tender—it should take about 20 minutes. Eat it on a plate, using a spoon to scoop it right out of the rind. Follow it up with a little bit of pork tenderloin and some salad, and that's your meal.”



carb calculator

Which carbs to pick—and the ones to skip.

SKIP Fruit juice

PICK Fresh whole fruit. Or freeze a few cubes of your favorite juice and put them in your water, so you satisfy the craving without adding lots of extra calories.

SKIP White bread

PICK 100 percent whole-wheat or multigrain bread. Look for brands that are high in fiber and weigh in at 100 calories or less per slice.

SKIP Granola

PICK A high-fiber cereal (5 to 12 grams per serving) that's low in sugar (fewer than 10 grams) and has whole grains listed as one of the first two ingredients on the label.

SKIP Chips

PICK Air-popped popcorn with a light sprinkling of sea salt. Or opt for prepackaged popcorn made with sunflower oil instead of butter.

SKIP Shrimp tempura roll

PICK A sushi roll with non-fried fish like salmon or yellowtail tuna. Request brown rice instead of white rice (if available).

SKIP Ice cream and frozen yogurt

PICK Store-bought or homemade frozen Greek yogurt popsicles.

