



The Mediterranean Diet

In the diet craze that has captured our attention over the last 4 decades, the one plan that has stood out above all the rest is the Mediterranean Diet. Since the Mediterranean embraces more than 20 countries, each with its own cuisine, the diet is really a fusion of the many foods consumed by the nations bordering that fabled azure Sea.

Olive oil is the anchor of the Mediterranean diet. No other natural oil has as much monounsaturated fat. When drizzled on salads and vegetables or grilled fish, it adds a pleasing aroma and texture. But olive oil by itself is somewhat bland and is always accompanied by liberal amounts of salt. Even Renaissance Italian descriptions of salads dressed with olive oil emphasized salt, though it was very costly at the time. Preferences for salt may vary, but salt has always accompanied the consumption of olive oil – salt is olive oil's alter ego.

Salt is central to the Mediterranean diet - olives can only be consumed if they're soaked in brine for weeks. Feta cheese is cured and stored in salt brine. Capers, anchovies, codfish and roe are all Mediterranean staples routinely packed in salt. The breads, pastries and sauces of the Mediterranean are all high in salt. Virgin olive oil, so cherished for making salads, is slightly bitter because of all the unique antioxidants it contains, so salt is especially important for improving its taste. Greek taramosalata is made from salted codfish roe, while tzatziki is made from salted, fresh cucumbers that are drained and added to yogurt; North African baba ghanoush is made of roasted, eggplant, blended with tahini, garlic, lemon juice, olive oil and lots of salt. Yet, the people of the Mediterranean, who enjoy all these foods, have the world's best cardiovascular health!

The diet is so healthy that the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute (NHLBI) used it as a model in their famous DASH Study (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension), which confirmed that the Mediterranean/DASH diet was healthier than the typical American diet and effectively reduced blood pressure (BP). NHLBI then repeated the study to check the effect of salt. The new DASH-Sodium trial, again demonstrated that the DASH diet could reduce BP. Compared to an American diet, DASH showed a reduction in systolic BP of 5.9 mm Hg, whereas reducing salt by 1/3 (the recommended Dietary Guidelines level), reduced BP by only 2.1 mm Hg. A 1/3 drop in salt is very difficult to achieve in real life and despite intense efforts in the UK, Canada and the USA over many years, it has never been realized. NHLBI also tested a 2/3 drop in salt to the American - an unattainable goal – but even this extreme measure fared no better than the simple switch to the DASH diet. When salt was reduced in the DASH diet, the BP drop found was nowhere near the benefit of switching from an American to the Mediterranean/DASH diet.

Cutting 1/3 of the salt dramatically reduces the palatability of the Mediterranean diet and makes it much less desirable for most people, while cutting 2/3 of the salt makes the diet completely unacceptable. The net consequence of such a strategy will be far fewer people consuming the diet and enjoying its critical health benefits (reduced heart disease, obesity, diabetes, hyperlipidemia, and improved cognitive function).

The Mediterranean diet has proven its worth for centuries. It's not broken, so let's not risk our health by trying to fix it.