



Eating for a Healthy Heart

The Mediterranean diet and more from Kathleen Zelman, MPH, RDN



Prevention starts on your plate.

Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States. And chances are, that affects you or someone you love. In fact, almost half of Americans have at least one of the key risk factors: high blood pressure, high cholesterol or being a smoker.*

But there's good news too: Many of those deaths could be prevented with lifestyle changes, such as:

- A heart-healthy diet
- Regular exercise
- Maintaining a healthy weight
- Not smoking
- Managing stress
- Managing other health conditions, such as diabetes

What is a heart-healthy diet?

Broadly speaking, a heart-healthy diet includes:

- A variety of fruits and vegetables
- Whole grains

- Lean proteins
- Healthy fats
- Low-fat or fat-free dairy
- Limited salt and sodium
- Limited saturated fat and sugar
- Moderate alcohol consumption (if you drink)

In this booklet, I'll show you how eating for heart health can be simple, satisfying and delicious. I'll introduce you to two heart-healthy ways of eating: the Mediterranean diet and the DASH diet. And I'll share some of my favorite heart-healthy recipes.

Kathleen Zelman, MPH, RDN

*Source: [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)



About Kathleen.

Kathleen Zelman is a nationally known nutritionist. She has extensive experience as a journalist. She served 12 years as a spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.

Let's get started!

What's inside.

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What is the Mediterranean diet?

A salad drizzled with olive oil and lemon juice. Yogurt laced with walnuts and fresh fruit. Whole-grain toast topped with avocado and sliced tomato. Sound delicious? Foods like these are more than just tasty. They're all part of the heart-healthy Mediterranean diet.

Far from exotic, eating the “Mediterranean way” is less about dieting and more about eating sensibly every day. Based on foods that are traditionally found in countries surrounding the Mediterranean Sea, it's one of the healthiest ways of living on the planet. It may even help lower the risk of heart disease and other health problems.*

Best of all, the Mediterranean lifestyle is grounded in pleasure — with an emphasis on locally grown, seasonal foods, regular activity and leisurely dining in the company of others.

Here are the basic ingredients:

Plant-based foods. Base your diet on vegetables, fruits, whole grains, nuts and seeds.

Protein. Eat moderate amounts of fish, eggs and poultry — and less red meat. Choose dairy products that are low-fat or fat-free.

Healthy fats. Choose olive or canola oil, nuts, avocados and fatty fish, such as salmon and sardines. These are high in heart-healthy monounsaturated fats.

Herbs and spices. Use these to flavor foods rather than salt, sauces and gravies.

Red wine. If you drink, opt for low or moderate amounts of red wine with meals. That's no more than two drinks a day for men or one drink a day for women.**

*Source: [U.S. National Library of Medicine](#)

**Some people should drink less than these amounts or not use alcohol at all. Talk with your doctor if you have questions about alcohol use or have difficulty drinking in moderation. [How much is a drink?](#)

8 steps toward a Mediterranean kitchen.

Eating the Mediterranean way doesn't mean you have to totally change your diet. Even small changes can make a big difference. Here are eight ways to start:



1. Eat lots of veggies.

Vegetables are essential to the fresh tastes and delicious flavors of the Mediterranean diet. Plus, they're packed with fiber and nutrients your body needs. Try:

- Fresh tomatoes drizzled with olive oil and sprinkled with feta cheese
- Colorful salads and garlicky greens
- Oven-roasted veggie medleys



2. Eat less meat.

Instead of putting meat at the center of your meal, use it as a garnish and flavor enhancer. Choose smaller amounts that are lean, such as poultry, fish and cuts of meat marked "loin." Try:

- Small strips of sirloin plus vegetables in a stir-fry
- Whole-grain pizza or pasta topped with lean meat and lots of veggies



3. Always eat breakfast.

Breakfast gets your body in gear. Start your day with fiber-rich foods, such as fruit and whole grains, to keep you pleasantly full for hours. Try:

- Granola, yogurt and fruit layered in a parfait
- Half an avocado mashed and spread on a slice of whole-grain toast
- Protein-rich eggs



4. Eat seafood twice a week.

Seafood contains healthy fats and protein. Fish such as tuna, herring, salmon and sardines are rich in heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids. And shellfish — including mussels, oysters and clams — have benefits for both brain and heart health. Try:

- Fish tacos topped with veggies
- Salmon with honey mustard

[See the next page](#)



5. Go vegetarian once a week — or more.

You can build delicious meals around beans, whole grains, nuts and vegetables, while increasing the flavor with fragrant herbs and spices. Try:

- White bean and spinach soup
- Butternut squash enchiladas
- A rice bowl with roasted chickpeas and veggies



6. Use healthy fats.

Your body needs healthy fats every day to provide energy and help you feel full. The key is to choose the right kind. Go for extra-virgin olive oil, nuts, seeds, olives and avocados. Try:

- A homemade vinaigrette with olive oil, cucumber and dill.
- A trail mix of unsalted almonds, sunflower seeds, whole-grain cereal and raisins.



7. Say yes to dairy.

The Mediterranean diet features less dairy than the typical American diet. But you can still enjoy dairy products in moderation. Choose low-fat or fat-free milk or yogurt. And stick with small amounts of a variety of cheeses. Try:

- A breakfast smoothie with fat-free milk, frozen peaches and a banana
- Whole-wheat crackers topped with apple slices and low-fat cheese
- A veggie dip made from salsa and plain, fat-free Greek yogurt



8. Satisfy your sweet tooth with fruit.

Choose from a wide range of delicious fresh fruits — from figs and oranges to pomegranates, grapes and apples. And save sugary sweets for special occasions. Try:

- Pears baked with cinnamon and nutmeg
- A mango parfait layered with berries and sliced almonds



Start with a well-stocked kitchen.

Here's a way to help you eat healthier: Keep nutrient-rich foods that are low in fat and calories on hand. See Kathleen Zelman's [healthy foods checklist](#).

What is the DASH diet?

An eating plan called DASH may help lower blood pressure. DASH stands for Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension. And it focuses on tasty, nutrient-rich foods, such as fruits, vegetables and whole grains — while limiting sodium.

DASH isn't just for people with high blood pressure. It's a wholesome eating plan for anyone. And it may also help improve cholesterol and other chronic conditions.

A DASH of good sense.

DASH focuses on healthy foods commonly available at the grocery store.

IT IS HIGH IN:

Vegetables and fruits

Low-fat dairy products

Whole grains

Poultry and seafood

Seeds and nuts

IT IS LOW IN:

Red and processed meats

Trans and saturated fats

Sweets

Sodium



What's the deal with sodium?

Sodium is known to contribute to high blood pressure. And most Americans consume far too much.

The DASH diet includes menus that limit sodium to 2,300 milligrams a day or 1,500 milligrams a day — depending on your health needs.

A good way to start doing things the DASH way: Check the sodium content on nutrition labels. And choose the options that are lowest in sodium.

Talk with your doctor if you'd like to explore the DASH diet more. Together you can set goals and monitor progress in your blood pressure as you make healthier food choices.

Source: National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute

Know your numbers.

If your blood pressure is too high, your doctor can help you make a plan to bring it down. And don't forget to check in for checkups — yearly or as your doctor advises. These visits are a great way to keep an eye on your blood pressure.



Smart snacking for a healthy heart.

Try these quick and tasty snack ideas inspired by the DASH eating plan.

[View slideshow.](#)

Dig in to heart-healthy recipes.

Heart-healthy eating can be mouthwateringly good! Whet your appetite with these dishes. And look for the “heart healthy” symbol as you [explore all our recipes on uhc.com](https://www.uhc.com).



Crunchy Fruit and Yogurt Breakfast Parfait



Sizzling Roasted Pecan Salmon



Eggs Sardou



Grilled Corn Confetti Slaw



Spicy Southwestern Black Bean Turkey Soup



Blueberry Nectarine Crisp





More resources for you.



Discover more about heart health.

- [My Healthy Heart](#)
- [10 Ways to Keep Your Heart Healthy](#)
- [Browse other heart health info](#)



Explore nutrition topics.

- [Clearing Up Confusion on Fats](#)
- [10 Secrets to Making Recipes Healthier](#)
- [Browse other nutrition tips](#)