

The Magical Power of the Mediterranean Diet

Commissioned by the National Resource Center on Nutrition & Aging; Written by: Amy Myrdal-Miller, MS, RDN, FAND

The **Mediterranean diet** is consistently rated among the top dietary patterns for not only promoting wellness and healthy aging, but also providing enjoyment. There are many reasons for these benefits.

The traditional Mediterranean diet contains abundant amounts of plant-based foods, like fruits, vegetables, and beans - foods that provide dietary fiber and potassium, which helps promote healthy blood pressure levels. It also incorporates nuts and seeds, foods that promote heart health and reduce risk of Type 2 diabetes.

The traditional Mediterranean diet also contains 43% of calories from fat, most of which is unsaturated. While the form varies by country and region, extra virgin olive oil is often associated with many health and enjoyment benefits of the Mediterranean diet.

Mediterranean sauces can be a cost-effective way to add alluring aromas and flavor as well as nutrient benefits to many dishes. The sauces can be used as marinades, dips, spreads, condiments, even dressings.

Here's some inspiration for using Mediterranean sauces in your senior nutrition program:

CHERMOULA

is a North African sauce that can also be used as a dressing or marinade. It's most typically associated with Moroccan cuisine, but it's also used in kitchens from Algeria and Tunisia to Libya. The recipe varies by country and cook, but the basic ingredients include garlic, parsley, mint or cilantro, lemon juice or vinegar, and olive oil. Spices like cumin add beautiful aroma, cayenne adds heat, and paprika contributes color. It's a wonderful sauce to serve with baked fish or chicken, and it also adds a flavorful kick to couscous and rice.

GREMOLATA

is a chopped herb condiment or garnish that originated in Milan, Italy. Gremolata is so simple, made with just parsley, garlic, and lemon zest. Adding it to roasted vegetables or vegetable-based soups for example, will brighten colors, aromas, and flavors, enticing the diner to take yet another bite or spoonful.

HUMMUS

originated in the eastern Mediterranean. It is traditionally made with chickpeas, tahini (made from toasted, ground, hulled sesame seeds), lemon juice, and garlic, but it can be made with any cooked legume from beans and dried peas to lentils. It's most often used as a dip for vegetables, pita chips, or crackers, but it also makes a great sandwich spread.

PESTO

comes from the Liguria region of northwest Italy. The classic version is made from fresh basil, garlic, olive oil, and pine nuts, but it can also be made with toasted walnuts. It's a great sandwich spread, and it pairs well with pasta.

ROMESCO

is often called “Spanish ketchup.” It features roasted red bell peppers, raw or roasted tomatoes, and garlic. Extra virgin olive oil and finely ground nuts, like toasted almonds and hazelnuts, add creamy richness while smoked pimentón pepper adds an alluring aroma. Romesco is great tossed with grilled or roasted vegetables. It also creates a delicious pasta sauce, and it’s a wonderful topping for roasted meat and poultry or baked fish.

SKORDALIA

is a creamy Greek sauce made with potatoes, bread, and almonds (or walnuts) and finished with lemon juice, garlic, and olive oil. It can be used as a dip for vegetables, a spread for sandwiches, an accompaniment for meat or poultry, or a topping for grain-based bowls.

TZATZIKI

is another creamy Greek sauce made with grated cucumber, Greek yogurt, garlic, vinegar, and dill. It’s the perfect condiment for baked fish, but it also provides a bright flavor note for roast beef.



Other Easy Ways to Add Mediterranean Foods and Flavors to Your Meals

- Beans and other pulses like chickpeas and lentils are EVERYWHERE in Mediterranean cuisine. Add beans, lentils or chickpeas to salads (e.g., a Greek salad) or soups (e.g., Minestrone), as appropriate.
- Many regions of the Mediterranean use meat sparingly compared to how we cook in the U.S. You can replace part of the meat in dishes like chili, meatloaf, or spaghetti sauce with beans or lentils, which are great sources of plant-based protein. You can puree the beans to add creamy texture to the meat sauce for dishes like lasagna.
- Vegetables are used in great abundance throughout the Mediterranean. Simply increasing the proportion of vegetables in dishes offers a nod to the sensibilities of Mediterranean cooking.
- Use extra virgin olive oil in place of canola, corn, or vegetable oil in salad dressings and sauces.
- Add a few toasted walnuts, almonds, or pistachios to salads. This will add some pleasing crunch, good fats, and lots of flavor!
- Mediterranean sauces are an easy way to add Mediterranean flavors to nearly any meal. Try adding pesto sauce to mayonnaise for chicken or turkey sandwiches or using hummus in place of the mayonnaise.
- Adding Mediterranean sauces to cooked rice is a wonderful way to boost the flavor when pairing with something bland, like baked fish (e.g., salmon puttanesca) or chicken (e.g., chicken caprese); chermoula, gremolata, and pesto work well.
- You can easily turn a bottle of barbecue sauce into Romesco sauce by adding some pureed roasted almonds or almond butter and a small amount of garlic.

Recipes and Resources

- Recipes for all these sauces can be found on www.epicurious.com.
- You can find more information and inspiration on Mediterranean cuisine in these amazing cookbooks. The authors of these books are very good, trusted recipe testers!
- Mediterranean Fresh: A Compendium of One-Plate Salad Meals and Mix-and-Match Dressings by Joyce Goldstein and Dan Barber | May 17, 2008. Available at www.amazon.com
- The Complete Mediterranean Cookbook: 500 Vibrant, Kitchen-Tested Recipes for Living and Eating Well Every Day by America's Test Kitchen | Dec 27, 2016. Available at www.amazon.com
- The New Mediterranean Diet Cookbook: A Delicious Alternative for Lifelong Health by Nancy Harmon Jenkins and Marion Nestle | Dec 30, 2008. Available at www.amazon.com

