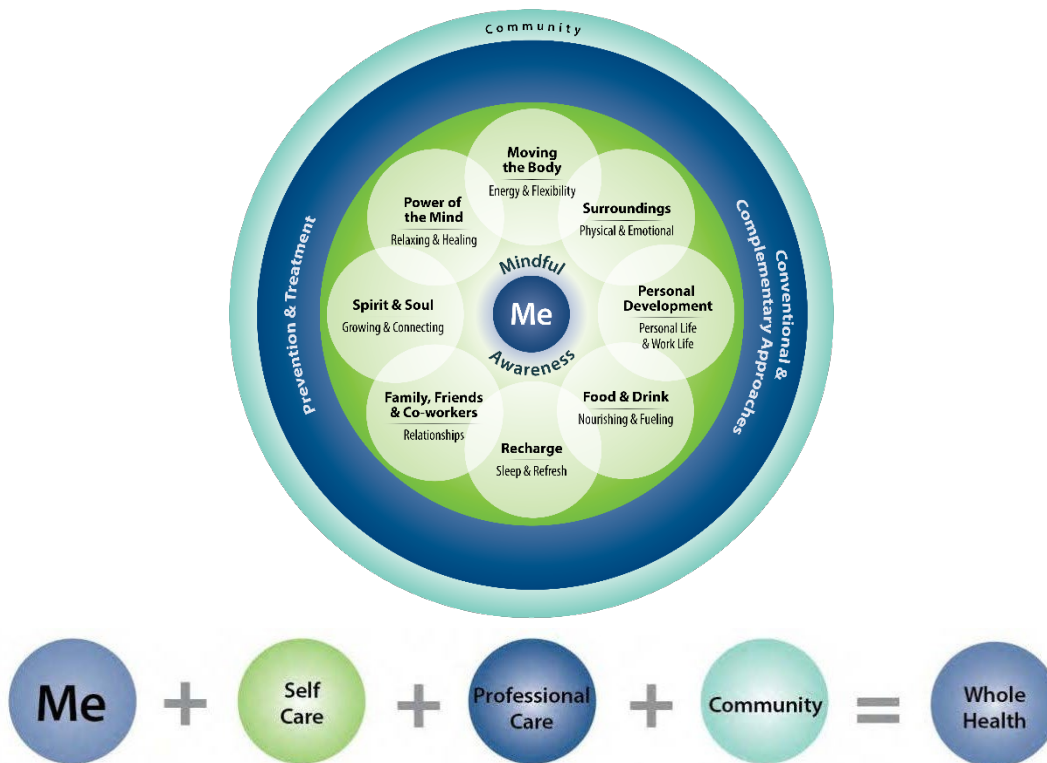


# WHOLE HEALTH: INFORMATION FOR VETERANS

## How to Eat a Mediterranean Diet



Whole Health is an approach to health care that empowers and enables YOU to take charge of your health and well-being and live your life to the fullest. It starts with YOU. It is fueled by the power of knowing yourself and what will really work for you in your life. Once you have some ideas about this, your team can help you with the skills, support, and follow up you need to reach your goals.

All resources provided in these handouts are reviewed by VHA clinicians and Veterans. No endorsement of any specific products is intended. Best wishes!

<https://www.va.gov/wholehealth/>

## How to Eat a Mediterranean Diet

### Why is it a good idea to eat based on a Mediterranean diet?

A Mediterranean diet is one that includes lots of fruits, vegetables and whole grains and fewer meats and sweets. There are many reasons why eating a Mediterranean diet is a good idea. From research, we know that it can help prevent many diseases. It can help you to<sup>1</sup>

- Lose weight<sup>2</sup>
- Lower your risk of heart disease, high blood pressure and stroke<sup>2,3</sup>
- Prevent many cancers<sup>4-6</sup>
- Avoid diabetes<sup>3</sup>
- Prevent dementia<sup>7</sup>

It can also reduce wheezing and asthma in children and reduce hip fractures in women over the age of 50.<sup>8,9</sup>

Another important part of being healthy is having healthy bacteria in your intestines.<sup>10</sup> Everyone has bacteria in the intestines, or the gut. Some bacteria are healthier than others. The foods you eat determine which bacteria live in your intestines. Eating a Mediterranean diet helps make sure that you have healthy bacteria. We also know that people who eat a Mediterranean diet live longer and are healthier overall.<sup>11</sup>

We know that eating a diet with plenty of fruits and vegetables and less meat helps the environment, too.<sup>12</sup> It takes more grain, land and fuel to feed and transport animals than it does to feed people. Eating a Mediterranean diet is one way we can protect our forests.

### What is a Mediterranean diet?

A Mediterranean diet is a pattern of eating based on what people from Crete, Greece and Southern Italy ate in the 1950s and 1960s. At that time, people from those regions were the healthiest, even if they didn't have good medical care. They lived longer. They also had fewer diseases.<sup>13</sup>

### What if I don't like typical Mediterranean foods? What can I do?

The Mediterranean diet is one example of a traditional diet.<sup>13</sup> Traditional diets are the foods eaten by people from different parts of the world in the 1950s and 1960s. This was before people ate as many processed foods as they do today. All regions have traditional diets: Latin America, Africa, Asia, the Arctic, and Europe. All traditional diets are healthier than more modern diets. They have a few things in common. They all emphasize eating meals together with friends and family and being physically active. Fruits, vegetables and whole grains are eaten at each meal. Dairy products (milk, yogurt, cheese) are eaten a few times per week in some cultures. Meat is eaten less often. Sweets are eaten only on occasion. Fruits are eaten for dessert. An Asian traditional diet may include rice, noodles and soybeans. A Latin American diet may have beans and corn. These diets may include different vegetables and different spices. But research shows that traditional diets are healthier than modern ones that have processed foods and sugar.<sup>14</sup> Processed foods are those that come in bags, boxes or cans. They may have artificial ingredients to make them

last longer. See the following website for information on other traditional diets: <http://www.oldwayspt.org/traditional-diets>. One reason that traditional diets are healthier is that they are [anti-inflammatory diets](#).

### **What is an anti-inflammatory diet?**

Inflammation is a natural way the body protects itself. It is how the body fights off infections and sends blood to areas that need healing. It is what causes an infected area to be red, warm, swollen, and painful.

However, too much inflammation can cause disease—arthritis, heart disease, rheumatoid arthritis, asthma, inflammatory bowel disease (Crohn’s disease, ulcerative colitis), chronic pain and fibromyalgia, dementia, and cancer.<sup>15</sup>

What we eat can cause inflammation in our bodies. We know some foods that can cause inflammation: red meat, dairy, refined and simple carbohydrates (white flour, sugar, white rice, white pasta), processed foods and alcohol. (Processed foods are those that have a long shelf life such as crackers, cookies and foods that are in boxes, bags or cans).

Other foods lower inflammation in our bodies. These include fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, beans, whole grains, and fish. All traditional diets have foods that lower inflammation. The Mediterranean diet is one example of a traditional diet. It has been studied by many researchers.

### **How do I eat a Mediterranean diet?**

Please refer to the pyramid diagram on the next page. Begin at the base of the pyramid.

- Every day:
  - Be physically active, eat meals with friends and family
  - Eat fruits, vegetables, whole grains, beans, nuts, seeds, herbs and spices
- At least twice per week:
  - Eat fish or seafood
- A few times per week, eat in small amounts:
  - Low fat dairy (cheese, yogurt)
  - Eggs
  - Poultry
- Eat less often (once per week or less)
  - Red meat
  - Sweets
- Drink:
  - Mostly water
  - Wine in moderation (For women: up to 1 glass daily, with no more than 7 glasses per week. For men: up to 1-2 glasses daily, with no more than 10 glasses per week).

# Mediterranean Diet Pyramid

*A contemporary approach to delicious, healthy eating*

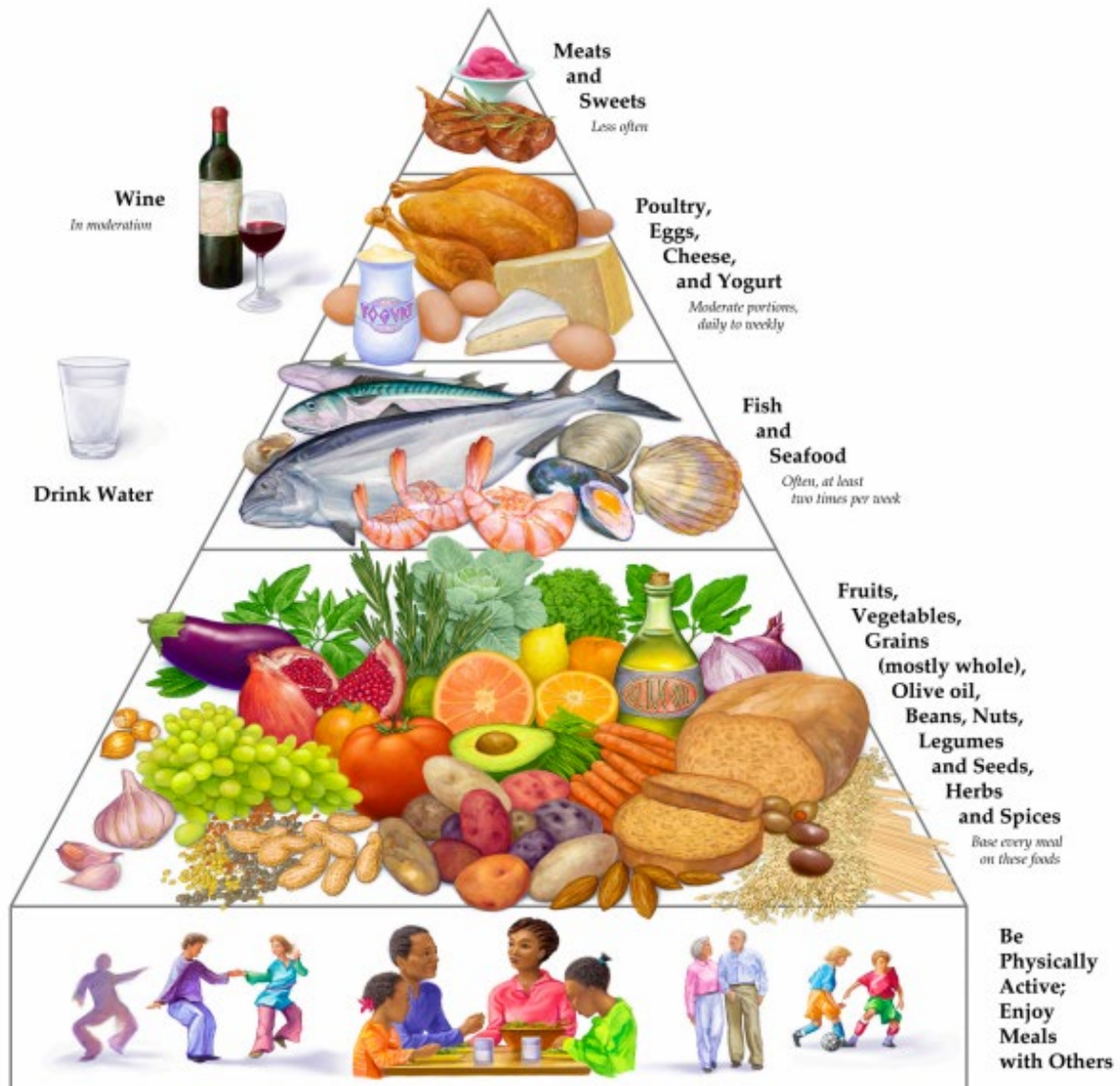


Illustration by George Middleton

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Figure 1. Oldways Mediterranean Diet Pyramid.<sup>13</sup> Reprinted with permission from Oldways Preservation & Exchange Trust. <https://www.oldwayspt.org/traditional-diets/mediterranean-diet>

**For you to consider:**

- Do you want to try eating based on a Mediterranean diet?
- Is there a different traditional diet you would like to try? For example, African, Asian, Latin American, vegetarian, or vegan?
- Why is eating in one of these ways important to you?
- You are more likely to be successful if you set clear goals.
  - What changes will you make first as you start to eat this way?
  - When will you start eating this way?
  - What changes will you make next? When will you make these changes?

The information in this handout is general. **Please work with your health care team to use the information in the best way possible to promote your health and happiness.**

**For more information:**

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
Veterans Health Administration	A variety of Whole Health handouts on healthy eating.	<a href="https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/veteran-handouts/index.asp?topic=FoodDrink">https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/veteran-handouts/index.asp?topic=FoodDrink</a>
VA "Whole Health" website	Video: "A Patient Centered Approach to Food & Drink," 8 <sup>th</sup> video in the "Components of Health and Well-Being" video series.	<a href="https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/video/videos.asp">https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/video/videos.asp</a>  <a href="https://www.va.gov/wholehealth/">https://www.va.gov/wholehealth/</a>
VA "MOVE! Weight Management" Program	Website describing MOVE! program options. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Links to a variety of handouts and worksheets on nutrition.</li> <li>• Links to videos.</li> <li>• Description of MOVE! Group Sessions. Contact your primary care provider for a referral.</li> <li>• Link to the MOVE! Coach mobile app, a program that allows you to set, track and achieve your goals on your own.</li> </ul>	<a href="http://www.move.va.gov/index.asp">http://www.move.va.gov/index.asp</a>

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
VA National Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention “Eat Wisely” website	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Website content.</li> <li>• Links to handouts and videos.</li> </ul>	<a href="http://www.prevention.va.gov/healthy_living/eat_wisely.asp">http://www.prevention.va.gov/healthy_living/eat_wisely.asp</a>
VA Nutrition and Food Service website	Sample menu	<a href="http://www.nutrition.va.gov/docs/UpdatedPatientEd/Mediterraneandiet.pdf">http://www.nutrition.va.gov/docs/UpdatedPatientEd/Mediterraneandiet.pdf</a>
Oldways is a non-profit food and nutrition education organization, with a mission to inspire healthy eating through cultural food traditions and lifestyles.	Information on traditional diets, recipes, health studies, and more.	<a href="http://www.oldwayspt.org/traditional-diets/mediterranean-diet">http://www.oldwayspt.org/traditional-diets/mediterranean-diet</a>
Consider taking a class on nutrition at a VA medical center or in your community.		

*This handout was written for the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) by Suhani Bora MD, Integrative Health Family Physician and former Academic Integrative Health Fellow, Integrative Health Program, University of Wisconsin Department of Family Medicine and Community Health. The handout was reviewed and edited by Veterans and VHA subject matter experts.*

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