

How to Eat a Mediterranean Diet when you are Vegan or Vegetarian



The Mediterranean diet is not a fad diet. It is a nutrition approach with a wealth of strong, scientific evidence supporting its ability to positively influence both physical and mental health.

With the recent increase in people following a vegan or vegetarian diet, we decided to look at how to can incorporate Mediterranean Diet principles as a vegan or vegetarian.

Much like the vegan or vegetarian approaches, the Mediterranean diet is inherently plant-based, with its key principles focusing on the intake of vegetables, fruit, nuts, seeds, extra virgin olive oil, whole grains and legumes. While it also traditionally incorporates the intake of fatty fish, poultry, a small amount of red meat and dairy, not consuming these foods does not mean you need to miss out on nutrients.

How to maximise nutrients at risk while following a plant-based Mediterranean dietary pattern:

Omega-3

Omega-3 is a form of healthy fat that has shown to have a multitude of health benefits including that of the brain, eye and heart health as well as mood disorders.

The most abundant food sources of omega-3 come from fatty fish like salmon, tuna, sardines, trout and mackerel – foods that are highly consumed on the Mediterranean diet. If you are pescatarian, you should aim to incorporate these types of fish into your diet 2-3 times per week. However, if you don't eat fish, there are some plant-derived sources of omega-3 that you should consume regularly. These include chia seeds, flaxseeds, hemp seeds and walnuts, as well as their associated oils.

Zinc

Zinc is a micronutrient that plays a key role in gene expression and immune function. Deficiency can lead to a reduced appetite and increased frequency or severity of illness.

The most plentiful food sources of zinc include meat, seafood, poultry and dairy. Therefore, it is a nutrient that can be under-consumed, especially for vegans. Plant-derived food sources include beans, pumpkin and sunflower seeds, almonds and fortified breakfast cereals.

Iron

Iron is the micronutrient that transports oxygen in the blood to tissues around the body. Inadequate intake of this nutrient can lead to fatigue, pale skin and ultimately iron deficiency anaemia – a condition more prevalent in females, vegans and vegetarians, and endurance athletes.

The most abundant food sources of iron are red meat. Plant-based sources of iron include fortified breakfast cereals, legumes, dark leafy greens and quinoa. It is worth noting that the iron found in plants isn't as effectively absorbed as that found in meat, and there are a few nutrient combinations to be aware of to maximise plant-based iron absorption.

The first is to avoid consuming your iron-rich foods with tannins, as these reduce absorption of the iron. Tannins include tea, coffee and wine. You are still entitled to consume these in moderation, just try to separate them from your meals.

The second is to try and consume your iron-rich foods with a source of vitamin C, as vitamin C enhances iron absorption. Fruit and vegetables are the strongest sources of vitamin C, with citrus fruit, broccoli, capsicum, kale and berries all providing a large dose.

Calcium

Calcium plays an array of roles in the body, the development and maintenance of strong bones being a key one.

The foods highest in calcium are dairy products, i.e. yoghurt, milk and cheese. Therefore, inadequacy of this nutrient is more of a concern for the vegans, as vegetarians typically still consume dairy. For the pescatarians out there, sardines are also a great source of calcium.

Plant-derived sources of calcium include fortified alternative milks like almond and soy milk (be sure to check the ingredients for fortification), green leafy vegetables, almonds and hard tofu.

Vitamin B12

With responsibilities in blood, nerve and brain function, vitamin B12 is another important micronutrient to be aware of, as deficiency can lead to nerve damage.

Mostly found in animal-derived foods, vegans and vegetarians must be diligent with this one. Plant-based sources include soy milks, breakfast cereals and nutritional yeast; however, this nutrient is a hard one to consume adequately without animal products. For further support, please contact an Accredited Practising Dietitian and/or your General Practitioner, as supplementation of this nutrient (and potentially others) may be indicated in some circumstances.

Protein

Lastly, protein is a fundamental dietary macronutrient. It plays a role in cell structure and function, muscle recovery and repair, as well as satiety. People typically tend to associate protein with animal-derived foods, but it is also prevalent in legumes, nuts, seeds and soy-based foods like tofu, tempeh and edamame. From the perspective of the Mediterranean diet, these foods are arguably more important than the animal products.

To summarise, if you are vegan or vegetarian, you can follow a Mediterranean Diet approach within your personal preferences. You just need to be diligent with your food substitutions. Often, the food substitutes advised for vegans and vegetarians are already a strong component of the Mediterranean diet, hence the dietary approaches are very compatible.