

Fat Is Good, Bagels Are Bad

Overview of simple health principles

Transforming your health with food and activity choices is the focus of this book. The subtitle could have been, “How a Greek grandmother would solve the health care crisis.” Most of the dietary guidelines in these pages favor the same simple, traditional whole foods that grandmothers throughout the Mediterranean have prepared for thousands of years – fish, leafy greens, garlic, chickpeas, yogurt, meat, cheese, eggs, and fresh pressed olive oil. Everyday food back then, trendy superfoods today. When served up with daily exercise and adequate sleep, these foods are powerful medicine for treating or preventing heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, type 2 diabetes, cancer,

dementia, Parkinson’s disease, obesity, osteoporosis, depression, anxiety, heartburn, and ADHD. For most of us, the decisions we make concerning the food we eat and our exercise and sleep habits have far greater impact on our long-term health than the genes inherited from our parents or prescriptions handed to us by our physicians. In fact, healthy lifestyle choices can often outperform medicines and surgical procedures. For example, if you have heart disease or have had a stroke, you might reduce the risk of a future cardiovascular event by 72% with a Mediterranean diet (page 16) and by 47% with exercise (page 71). Now *that* should get our attention!

GOOD HEALTH GUIDELINES

- **Eat real food**, which means food that our great-grandparents would recognize. If it can be raised on a farm or harvested from a forest, ocean, or river, it’s real food.
- **Food commonly eaten** for more than 150 years is innocent until proven guilty, but food invented in the last 150 years is guilty until proven innocent.
- **Eat a wide variety of whole foods** as people have done throughout history, eating freely from whatever plant and animal food was available. This omnivorous way of eating is easier to follow than a restrictive diet, and has better evidence for improving health.
- **Avoid processed foods** – the less that has happened to food since it was a living plant or animal, the better (page 59).
- **Avoid added sugar, refined grains, and hydrogenated fats.** These are the bad boys of the food world, and avoiding them will reduce our risk for most diseases.
- **Prepare your own food from scratch where possible.** This may seem persnickety but it’s a game changer. Food made by you with simple whole food ingredients is better than a commercially-prepared version with the same ingredients – see page 10.
- **Be active every day and get your sleep!** Exercise and sleep are strong medicine, and as essential as good food (pages 70–76).
- **Question all diet and lifestyle dogma, including ours.** Ask for evidence and learn to separate the bona fide from the bogus (page 12). Be alert for new ideas and research that come along to keep us all humble.
- **Above all**, as the book of Proverbs says, “Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a fatted calf and hatred therewith.” It doesn’t make sense to sacrifice relationships on the altar of good food – but you may be surprised at how well incremental change can work. (See *Transition Tips* on page 112.)

WHOLE FOOD

We use the term “whole food” often. It refers to food with as few layers of processing between the original plant or animal and your table as possible. It can mean raw, frozen, canned, dried, or cooked, but does *not* include processes unavailable to the home cook, such as those used by the food industry to produce breakfast cereal (page 66) or refined vegetable oils (page 67). Traditional methods such as culturing and fermentation (to make yogurt, sauerkraut, cheese, sourdough bread, and so on – see page 49) are minimal forms of processing and actually *enhance* the nutritional benefit and probiotic content of whole food. Commercial processing *reduces* nutritional content – or removes it entirely. (See page 59.)

Why home cooking is so important

A study¹ from Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health analyzed data from 9,569 adults and noted: “*Americans are cooking less and relying more on food prepared away from home, which is typically more energy [calorie] dense and of lower nutritional value.*”

Six reasons to cook from scratch:

1. People who eat food prepared from scratch at home eat fewer calories: commercially-prepared food is typically more calorie-dense.²
2. Homemade food is less processed, resulting in higher levels of nutrients and naturally occurring probiotics and fiber.
3. Food prepared at home will more likely have better ingredients and fewer altered fats, sugars, and chemicals.
4. Home-cooked meals are associated with lower risks of diabetes,³ cardiovascular risk factors,⁴ and cancer.⁵
5. Eating at home generally saves money.
6. We can wear slippers to the table.

¹ Wolfson, J.A. and Bleich, S.N. Public Health Nutr 2015;18:1397-406

² Tumin, R. & Anderson, S. J Acad Nutr Diet 2017;117:937-45

³ Zong, G. et al. NHS + HPFUS AHA 11/2015 Abstract 17285

⁴ Birlouez-Aragon, I. et al. Am J Clin Nutr 2010;91:1220-6

⁵ Fiolet, T. et al. BMJ 2018;360:k322

Recognize these roadblocks?

The concept of eating well is usually admired. So is daily exercise – most people think it’s a wonderful idea to walk for 30 minutes every day until the time comes for the rubber to meet the road. (See *Let’s Move More* starting on page 70 for some ways to combat exercise paralysis.) As for improving our food choices, most of us are also uncomfortably aware that change would eliminate some foods we love the most. Here are some answers to a few of the more common obstacles to eating well:

■ “All the experts seem to disagree.”

There is no credible disagreement on the subject of whole food versus highly refined food – so eat whole food (page 35) and make everybody happy. (See pages 12–14 for some tips on evaluating conflicting opinions.)

■ “I don’t have time to cook.” Calculate the time you spend waiting for someone else to prepare your food, and then think again: you *really* don’t have time? If your pantry and refrigerator are stocked with easy-to-prepare whole foods, it doesn’t need to take any more time to eat healthier food. For example, most of the recipes in this book use ingredients found in *Pantry Basics* on page 130, and many don’t require any more time than it takes to chop and combine.

■ “My family won’t eat healthy food.”

Healthy food can taste just as good as processed food when it’s prepared with enough good fat and flavor. (See *Feeding Kids* on page 147.) Salt, freshly ground pepper, butter or olive oil, a bit of fresh sausage (page 68), some cream, grated cheese – sometimes this is all it takes for a plate of food to go from no-thanks to *wow!*

■ “It’s too expensive.” This is a common myth that needs to be debunked. Eating well is affordable on *any* budget *if* we prepare our own food from scratch, stock our pantry from the bulk section and perimeter of the grocery store, eat out less, and cut out processed foods, snacks, and drinks.

Three quick facts about the Mediterranean diet

The Mediterranean diet pattern has three notable features that make it easy to adopt:

1. **It has the best evidence for improving health and saving lives.** We will be going on (and on) about that in the following pages.
2. **It's omnivorous.** It includes a wide range of traditional foods (both plants and animals) eaten for thousands of years throughout the world, and is therefore adaptable to any culture or budget.
3. **It does not restrict good fat.** The Mediterranean diet includes all naturally occurring fats. This is a key feature: fat makes food taste better and satisfies hunger longer. As an important side benefit, a diet that doesn't restrict fat makes it easier to eat less sugar and refined grains without feeling deprived.

THE MEDITERRANEAN DIET

Although there's no single definition for the Mediterranean diet, there is a general pattern of eating common to many Mediterranean regions and consistent with what has been used in Mediterranean diet studies:

- High intake of **plants**: vegetables, fruits, beans (and other legumes), nuts, seeds, and grains (historically mainly unrefined)
- High intake of **(extra-virgin) olive oil**
- Moderately-high intake of **fish** (depending on geography)
- Moderate intake of **dairy** (historically cultured, like yogurt, kefir, and cheese)
- Moderate intake of **meat, poultry, and eggs**
- Moderate intake of **wine**, generally with meals
- Moderate intake of **dark chocolate***

* That chocolate is not officially part of the Mediterranean diet is clearly an oversight. Eleven out of ten people agree.

How does it work?

The benefits of the Mediterranean diet can't be attributed to any one component. It would certainly be convenient to be able to identify a particular food like olive oil, or wine, or chickpeas as the main player, but like most things in life it isn't that simple; the Mediterranean diet benefits are consistently associated with an overall pattern. This is part of the delicious mystery of "food as medicine" – the benefits clearly seem to be a triumph of teamwork rather than any single factor. (In other words, sardines are optional – but anyone who feels noncommittal about sardines should perhaps try the recipe for *Sardine Pâté* on page 169.) Other whole food diets may have similar benefits but none have been studied as extensively.

How is the Mediterranean diet different from a plant-based diet?

You could say that the Mediterranean diet is the original plant-based diet. However, even though the Mediterranean approach has a strong emphasis on vegetables, fruit, beans, and grains, it also includes meat, fish, eggs, and dairy. The term "plant-based" is often used to describe a vegetarian or vegan dietary pattern, often with the assumption that it's a healthier way to eat. On pages 32–34 we present some of the medical data showing that omnivorous diets (like the Mediterranean) have better health outcomes than highly-restrictive diets (like vegetarian or vegan).

Watch out for plant-based foods produced in industrial plants!

Many of the products sold as "plant-based" are simply highly processed substitutes for whole foods. Common examples are almond, hemp, soy, and rice milks, as well as plant-based protein powders and meat substitutes. For reasons to avoid all highly processed foods regardless of labels such as "plant-based," "organic," "non-GMO," or "low glycemic index," see pages 59–68.