

Great Medicine

Overview of simple health principles and some high-quality diet studies

Transforming your health with lifestyle medicine 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 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, it is powerful medicine for treating or preventing heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, type 2 diabetes, cancer, dementia, Parkinson’s disease, obesity, and depression.

For most of us, the decisions we make about the food we eat and our exercise and sleep habits have greater impact on our long term health than the genes inherited from our parents or prescriptions handed to us by our physicians.

In fact, these lifestyle choices can often out-perform medicines and surgical procedures. For example, if you have heart disease or have had a stroke, you can reduce the risk of a future cardiovascular event by up to 72% with a Mediterranean diet (page 12) and by 47% with exercise (page 68).

The subject of *Good Food* starts on page 20 and *Not Good Food* on page 42. *Let’s Move More* begins on page 50 and *Get Enough Sleep* on page 56. The close relationship between type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and the waistline is explored in *Solutions* on page 59, followed by the *Risk Reduction Action Plan* (page 69) incorporating all of these key lifestyle choices.

GOOD FOOD GUIDELINES

Here are some simple health guidelines and principles we can count on:

- **Eat real food.** Real food is usually 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 should be innocent until proven guilty, and 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.
- **Choose minimally processed foods** – the less that has happened to food since it was a living plant or animal, the better.
- **Avoid 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 with simple whole food ingredients, like the homemade granola on page 131, is better than packaged commercially-prepared options that may have similar ingredients but are highly processed – a factor we talk about on the next page.
- **Question all diet and lifestyle dogma, including ours.** Ask for evidence and learn to separate the bona fide from the bogus. Stay 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 94.)

What is whole food?

We use the term “whole food” often. It always means food that has been minimally processed – whether raw, frozen, canned, dried, or cooked. Traditional processing methods like culturing (to make cheese and yogurt) and fermenting (to make sauerkraut and sourdough bread) are also minimal forms of processing and can actually enhance the nutritional benefit, but there should be as few layers of processing between the original plant or animal and your table as possible.

Why to avoid processed food

Knowing how any food has been processed in order to reach our table is vital to deciding what is good to eat. As Michael Pollan puts it in his Food Rule #19, “If it came from a plant, eat it; if it was made in a plant, don’t.”¹ When any food is commercially processed, its nutritional profile is usually downgraded, its calorie-density upgraded, and oddball chemicals can sneak in. Some clues are revealed in the ingredient list, but factors like heat, time, and chemical processing can destroy, alter, or remove valuable fats, fiber, and nutrients, and *this process can be completely invisible to the consumer*. High levels of processing and heat can transform real food into food-like substances that its own parents wouldn’t recognize – for example, chicken nuggets and textured vegetable protein. Another significant effect of eating processed food is that it seems to block the signal to our brain that we are full, encouraging us to eat more. It appears that people who eat more commercially-prepared (as in a restaurant or deli) and/or industrially processed foods have double the risk of depression,² and quickly show signs of metabolic deterioration that leads to type 2 diabetes and clogged arteries.³ For a larger discussion of processed food see *Not Good Food* on pages 42-49.

¹ Food Rules: an eater’s manual (Michael Pollan ©2009)

² Akbaraly, T. et al. Br J Psych 2009;195:408-13

³ Birlouez-Aragon, I. et al. AJCN 2010;91:1220-6

INTRODUCING THE MEDITERRANEAN DIET

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

1. It saves lives

The Mediterranean diet has the best evidence for improving health and saving lives. We will be going on (and on) about that later.

2. It’s very old

It includes a wide range of traditional foods (both plants and animals) eaten for thousands of years throughout the world, and adapts to any culture and budget.

3. It does not restrict good fat

The Mediterranean diet includes all naturally-occurring fats. This is an especially important feature; fat not only makes food taste better, but it satisfies hunger longer. As an important side benefit, the unrestricted fat makes it easier to reduce our intake of sugar and refined grains without feeling deprived.

What is the Mediterranean diet?

Although there is 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 wine, generally with meals
- Moderate dark chocolate*

(* While chocolate is not officially part of the Mediterranean diet, we are sure it’s an oversight. Eleven out of ten patients agree.)