

Chapter 1

A Guided Tour through the Mediterranean Diet

In This Chapter

- ▶ Discovering the key components of the Mediterranean diet
 - ▶ Recognizing key differences between the Mediterranean diet and a traditional Western diet
 - ▶ Taking a look at the health benefits
-

The Mediterranean diet is a way of life — one where you eat lots of fresh food and slow down. More technically, the Mediterranean diet is a modern set of guidelines inspired by traditional diet patterns of southern Italy, the Greek island of Crete, and other parts of Greece. The lifestyle was first researched in the 1960s, and in 2010, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) officially recognized this diet pattern to be part of the cultural heritage of Italy, Greece, Spain, and Morocco. A more rural lifestyle is a common thread among all these regions.

This chapter gives you an overview of the Mediterranean diet, explaining what it is, what it includes, and how it's more than just a food plan; it's also a way to embrace and enjoy life.

Introducing the Mediterranean Diet

The Mediterranean Sea, connected to the Atlantic Ocean by the thin (14-mile wide) Strait of Gibraltar in the west and to the Sea of Marmara and the Black Sea by the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus in the east, has long played an important role in the civilizations that border it. Surrounded by the coastlines of 21 countries — Algeria, Croatia, Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece, Italy, Libya, Malta, Montenegro, and Spain to name just a few — it has been an

important route for merchants and travelers and a primary source of food for the civilizations that sprang up around it. The climate in the Mediterranean region — hot and dry in the summer and mild and rainy in the winter — lends itself to crops like olives, figs, and grapes; and the rocky, coastal terrain is more suitable for sheep, goats, and chicken than that staple of traditional western diets: beef. The nearby sea provides an abundance and variety of seafood.

This region has long fascinated and inspired the Western world in terms of governance, philosophy, science, mathematics, art, architecture, and more. Now, studies that draw direct links between what is called the Mediterranean diet and reduced risks for heart disease, reduced incidence of cancer and cancer deaths, and reduced incidence of Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases have given people another reason to embrace the Mediterranean.

The Mediterranean diet relies on fruits and vegetables, lean protein sources, and healthy fats — hallmarks of all healthy diets. So you may be wondering what makes this diet different. Here's a quick overview of the Mediterranean diet and its effects; the next sections provide a fuller introduction to these concepts:

- ✔ **The recommended proportions:** If you look at the Mediterranean food pyramid (see Figure 1-1), you can see a couple of interesting things, the first of which is that the food groups you may be accustomed to (dairy, meats and other proteins, fruits, and vegetables) are regrouped. Specifically, all the plant-based foods — fruits, vegetables, and foods (like grains, legumes, nuts, olives, olive oil, herbs, and spices) that come from plants — are all in one group, and the proteins are divided into no less than three categories, with chicken grouped with dairy products, and red meat stuck at the top with sweets! This division is a key reason why the Mediterranean diet is so healthful: it includes a specific balance of foods that are high in vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants and contain the optimum balance of fatty acids.
- ✔ **The holistic nature of the diet:** The second thing you may notice about the food pyramid is that its foundation isn't a food group. It's a call to live a physically active life and to enjoy meals with others.



The Mediterranean Food Guide Pyramid is based on the dietary traditions of the Greek island of Crete, other parts of Greece, and southern Italy around 1960, when chronic diseases such as heart disease and cancer were low. As Figure 1-1 shows, the focus is on eating a diet rich in vegetables, fruits, whole grains, legumes, and seafood; eating less meat; and choosing healthy fats such as olive oil. Note also the importance of fun activities, time shared with family and friends, and a passion for life.

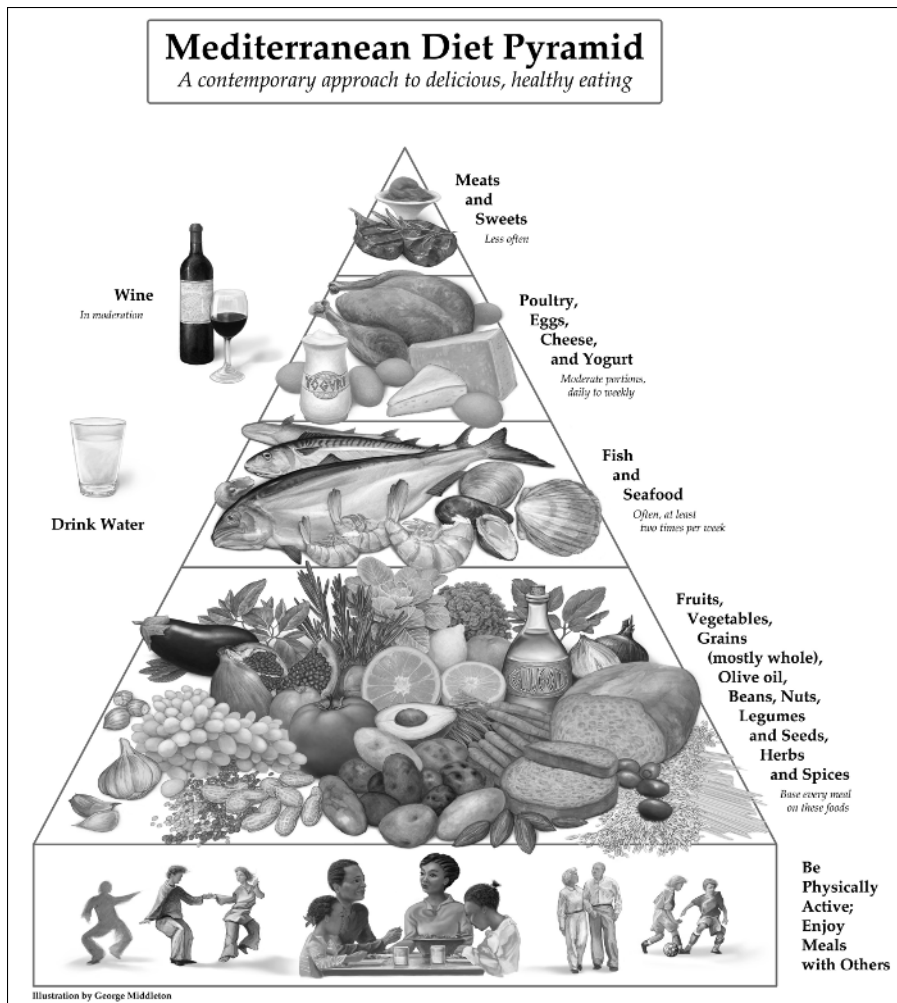


Figure 1-1:
 The Mediterranean Food Guide Pyramid.

© 2009 Oldways Preservation & Exchange Trust, www.oldwayspt.org

Cooking with healthy fats

Although Mediterranean residents don't consume a low-fat diet, their dietary pattern is considered heart-healthy. How can that be? Because not all fats are created equal. People in the Mediterranean consume more of the healthier types of fats (monounsaturated fats and polyunsaturated omega-3 fatty acids) and less of the omega-6 polyunsaturated fatty acids and saturated fats other cultures tend to overload on.

The good news: Eating Mediterranean cooking doesn't mean you have to go on a low-fat diet. You just have to maintain a healthier ratio of these different groups of fats. In fact, people in the Mediterranean consume about 35 percent of their total daily calories from fat but less than 8 percent of their calories come from saturated fats (in the U.S., the average intake of saturated fats is 11 percent of daily calories).

The trick is to focus on different the types of fats, tipping the balance toward healthy monounsaturated fat sources such as olive oil, canola oil, olives, nuts, and avocados and away from saturated fats such as animal fats. Using monounsaturated fats is often associated with better heart health. Eating a good amount of dietary fat also helps to keep you feeling full for a longer period of time.

To find out more about the role of healthy fats and olive oil in particular, head to Chapter 8.

Making plant-based foods the foundation of every meal

One of the most important concepts of the Mediterranean diet pattern is consuming lots of plant foods such as fruits, veggies, legumes (beans, lentils, and peas, for example), and whole grains, such as bulgur wheat or barley. In fact, people in the Mediterranean commonly eat five to ten servings of fruits and vegetables each day, which often means having two to three vegetable servings with each meal. The legume and whole grains are the other daily staples. Foods in these categories are naturally low in calories and high in nutrients, which makes weight and health management easy.

Following is a variety of the plant-based foods that are grown in the Mediterranean and feature prominently in the Mediterranean diet:

- ✔ **Legumes:** Chickpeas, lentils, peas
- ✔ **Fruits:** Olives, mandarin oranges, figs, grapes, lemons, persimmons, pomegranates
- ✔ **Grains:** Barley, corn, rice, wheat
- ✔ **Nuts:** Almonds, hazelnuts, pine nuts, walnuts
- ✔ **Vegetables:** Asparagus, broccoli, cabbage, green beans, garlic, onions, eggplant, tomatoes, broccoli rabe, artichokes

Chapters 9 through 11 feature the details of the benefits of all these plant-based foods.

Eating seafood weekly

Seafood is a weekly staple in the Mediterranean diet, and with good reason. First, it's a local product. The least expensive seafood in the Mediterranean region includes sardines, anchovies, mackerel, squid, and octopus. Mid-priced fish and shellfish include tuna, trout, clams, and mussels. For a pricey, special occasion meal, options include lobster and red mullet.



During the 1960s, before the area was over-fished, a variety of seafood was available in the Mediterranean. Unfortunately, fish stocks today are significantly low due to overfishing, and many important species, such as tuna, are threatened.

Second, seafood is a great source of those coveted omega-3 fatty acids. You can add seafood to a few weekly meals and reap the same benefits. If you live near a coast, you have a great opportunity to find fresh fish in your local stores and restaurants. If you're landlocked, don't discount lakes and rivers for fresh fish.



Check out <http://www.montereybayaquarium.org/cr/seafoodwatch.aspx> for a list of recommended fish in your region. This guide is a great tool to help you choose local fish with low contaminants and also to protect against overfishing. Don't like fish? You can get omega-3 fatty acids in other ways, such as with fish oil supplements or by eating lots of fresh herbs, walnuts, and flaxseeds.

Limiting your consumption of red meat

Many people automatically consider protein foods such as beef, poultry, pork, and fish as an entree. But in the Mediterranean, beef is only served once or twice a month rather than several times a week, as it is in many U.S. kitchens. And when it does hit the table, it's usually as a small (2- to 3-ounce) side dish rather than an 8-plus-ounce entree. This habit helps ensure a reasonable intake of saturated fats and omega-6 fatty acids. (See the earlier section "Cooking with healthy fats" for info on why balancing fat intake is important.)



Red meat used to be a luxury item in rural parts of the Mediterranean, so folks there ate it less frequently. Even though it's now more accessible to the average Joe, the serving limits have stuck over the years.

Before you panic, keep in mind that the Mediterranean diet doesn't require that you eliminate all red meat. The goal is simply to eat less animal protein and more plant-based protein. Fortunately, you can easily replace a portion

of your traditional meat serving with lentils or beans to add plant-based protein to your meals. For example, instead of having an 8-ounce steak, you may choose to have a 3- or 4-ounce portion but also have a lentil salad or sprinkle some nuts on a salad. This strategy also helps you add more vegetable servings to help fill the plate.

Who knows? You may even discover that you don't miss the meat. Because of their use of spices and herbs, many Mediterranean recipes featuring beef, for example, are so full of flavor that a small serving becomes more satisfying.

You can find what you need to know about both seafood and animal protein sources in Chapter 12.

Using dairy in moderation

You may think of the Mediterranean as a cheese-eater's heaven, but the truth is that people in the Mediterranean areas from which this diet comes don't consume an abundance of cheese. Dairy is consumed on a daily basis in the Mediterranean diet, and cheese (along with yogurt) is a common source of calcium; however, moderation is the key.

Incorporate two to three servings of dairy products daily. One serving may include an 8-ounce glass of milk, 8 ounces of yogurt, or 1 ounce of cheese. Stick with the low-fat versions of milk and yogurt to help lower your saturated fat intake; because you're eating so little of it, you can go with regular cheese if you want.

Enhancing flavor with herbs and spices

Fresh herbs and spices not only add tremendous flavor to food but also have many hidden health benefits. Oregano and basil in your spaghetti sauce, for example, do more than provide a distinct Italian flavor; those herbs are also plants, which means they have all sorts of health benefits that can make a big impact on your overall health. Simple seasonings such as ginger and oregano contain *phytochemicals*, which are natural health-promoting substances that have been found to protect against conditions such as cancer and heart disease.

You may be surprised to hear that herbs and spices are also loaded with healthy omega-3 fatty acids, which help decrease inflammation in the body. Check out some of the specific health benefits of commonly used herbs and spices:

- ✔ Basil is shown to have anti-inflammatory effects and may be useful for people with chronic inflammation, such as arthritis or inflammatory bowel disease. Basil also protects against bacteria and is an excellent source of vitamin A, which helps reduce damage to the body from free radicals.
- ✔ Cinnamon helps people better control their blood sugars because it slows digestion and therefore the rise of blood sugar — not to mention that it's a wonderful flavor for baking or in a cup of tea!
- ✔ Oregano is a nutrient-dense spice containing fiber, iron, manganese, calcium, vitamin C, vitamin A, and omega-3 fatty acids. It's shown to have antibacterial and antioxidant properties.
- ✔ Parsley is a rich source of the antioxidants vitamin A and vitamin C, providing protection from heart disease and cancer. (And you thought eating your parsley garnish was silly.)
- ✔ Turmeric acts as a powerful anti-inflammatory and antioxidant, helping protect against arthritis, heart disease, and certain cancers.

Other herbs and spices common to Mediterranean cooking include rosemary, sage, dill, thyme, mint, and fennel.

If you already use ample herbs and spices in your own cooking, you're on the right track. If not, try to discover new flavors and ways to add more of these plants into your diet. Chapter 17 lists ten must-have spices to add to your repertoire.

Drinking wine with your meals

Drinking a glass of wine with dinner is certainly a common practice in the Mediterranean regions. Red wine has special nutrients that are shown to be heart-healthy; however, moderation is important. Enjoying some red wine a couple times a week is certainly a good plan for heart health, although you want to check with your doctor to ensure it's okay for you. Check out Chapter 13 for specifics on the benefits of red wine.

Embracing life

Historically, the people in the rural Mediterranean got plenty of daily activity through work, getting where they needed to go on foot, and having fun. Although you may rely heavily on your car and think the Mediterranean lifestyle isn't realistic for you, you can still find ways to incorporate both aerobic exercise (which gets your heart rate up) and strength-training exercises regularly.



Walking encompasses both aerobic and strength training and helps relieve stress. If you live close to markets or restaurants, challenge yourself to walk to them rather than drive, or simply focus on taking a walk each day to unwind.

Community spirit is a large part of the Mediterranean culture and is something that's disappearing in American culture. Getting together on a regular basis with friends and family is an important priority for providing a sense of strong community and fun. The fun and laughter that come with friendly get-togethers are vital for stress management. Without these little joyful experiences, stress can tip to an unhealthy balance.



To put this strategy into practice, invite some of your close family and friends over each week, perhaps for dinner. It can be as casual as you like. The important thing is to add this type of fun and enjoyment to your life more often.

The Mediterranean coast is full of sunshine, good food, and beautiful surroundings, so the people who live there naturally tend to have a strong passion for life, family, friends, nature, and food. Choosing to have a strong passion and love of life is associated with more happiness and fulfillment and less stress. So what are you passionate about? Perhaps you love the arts, or maybe nature is your thing. Whatever your passions are, make sure to find a way to make them a regular part of your life.

Chapter 14 describes the Mediterranean lifestyle and offers suggestions on how you can incorporate those qualities into your own life.

Getting Started

The things that differentiate the eating habits of people living on the Mediterranean coast and other cultures are actually quite subtle. These small differences include eating smaller portion sizes and regulating how often certain foods are consumed. The changes may be small, but they make a significant difference for weight management, health, and well-being. You may have trouble believing that such small shifts can really make that big an impact, but they really do.

This section dives into meal planning to show you some small changes based on the Mediterranean lifestyle that have big effects on the amounts of calories and nutrients you consume. You can also find some valuable lifestyle ideas to get you into the Mediterranean spirit.

Identifying the flavors of the Mediterranean coast

As noted previously, 21 countries have coastlines that border the Mediterranean Sea. Having a decent understanding of these countries and their cooking styles can help you have a better appreciation for this way of life.

Table 1-1 lists some of the countries in the Mediterranean that are part of this lifestyle and the associated flavors and cooking styles commonly used in those areas.

<i>Region</i>	<i>Commonly Used Ingredients</i>	<i>Overall Cuisine Flavor</i>
Southern Italy	Anchovies, balsamic vinegar, basil, bay leaf, capers, garlic, mozzarella cheese, olive oil, oregano, parsley, peppers, pine nuts, mushrooms, prosciutto, rosemary, sage, thyme, tomatoes	Italian food is rich and savory, with strongly flavored ingredients. Look for tomato-based sauces and even an occasional kick of spicy heat.
Greece	Basil, cucumbers, dill, fennel, feta cheese, garlic, honey, lemon, mint, olive oil, oregano, yogurt	Greek cooking runs the gamut from tangy with citrus accents to savory. Ingredients such as feta cheese add a strong, bold flavor, while yogurt helps provide a creamy texture and soft flavor.
Morocco	Cinnamon, cumin, dried fruits, ginger, lemon, mint, paprika, parsley, pepper, saffron, turmeric	Moroccan cooking uses exotic flavors that encompass both sweet and savory, often in one dish. The food has strong flavors but isn't necessarily spicy.
Spain	Almonds, anchovies, cheeses (from goats, cows, and sheep), garlic, ham, honey, olive oil, onions, oregano, nuts, paprika, rosemary, saffron, thyme	Regardless of what part of Spain you're in, you can always count on garlic and olive oil setting the stage for a flavorful dish. Spanish dishes are often inspired by Arabic and Roman cuisine with emphasis on fresh seafood. You often find combinations of savory and sweet flavors, such as a seafood stew using sweet paprika.



Although you may see some of the same ingredients in many recipes, the flavors used in different countries or regions create entirely different dishes. If you've eaten both Italian and Greek meatballs, for example, you know that the two varieties sure don't taste the same.

Grasping the importance of meal planning

Meal planning provides you a road map for the week of what you're going to eat, when you'll prepare those meals, and what foods you need to have handy in your kitchen to do so. By taking the steps to do some planning, changing to a Mediterranean diet is much easier and less stressful.

Meal planning on some level is important for several reasons:

- ✔ It ensures that you're efficient with your time and have everything you need on hand from the grocery store and markets. This preparedness also helps keep you on track with your Mediterranean lifestyle because you always have the fixings for fresh meals at your fingertips.
- ✔ It makes cooking easier during the week because you already know what you're making instead of trying to think of what you can cook with the chicken and cauliflower you bought.
- ✔ It saves you money by decreasing food waste. Do you ever buy broccoli and then wonder what to do with it as it starts yellowing in your refrigerator? Waste.



If you have a pit in your stomach right now and are ready to skip this section, hold on! Meal planning needs to (and can) work into your lifestyle. Here are a few different approaches; hopefully, you find one that works for you:

- ✔ **The detailed meal plan:** This plan is for those who love details and planning. Sit down and write out a plan for breakfast, lunch, and dinner for each day of the week. (You may want to include snacks as well.) You can make each day's foods interchangeable, but this planning method at least makes sure you have a plan and can go on your way this week with everything organized.
- ✔ **The rotating two-week meal plan:** If you like details and convenience, this setup is perfect for you. Spend some time making up a two-week meal plan, complete with shopping list, and you've done all the work you need. You still get plenty of variety with a two-week meal plan, but you may need to change it up every couple of months to make seasonal menus.

- ✔ **The fast meal plan:** If you don't want to waste time on making a meal plan for each and every meal for the week, think about your habits and plan accordingly. For example, if you regularly eat a few different items for breakfast and usually eat leftovers or sandwiches and fruit for lunch, you can focus planning dinners and the few staples you need for the other meals. And if you typically use leftovers for other meals, making a menu plan for four to five nights a week will work out just fine.
- ✔ **The super-fast meal plan:** Perhaps you need something even speedier than the fast menu plan. Instead of planning four or five dinners a week, focus on two to three and plan some convenience meals, such as entree salads you can throw together or canned or homemade frozen soups.

Head to Chapter 15 for more ways to make incorporating the Mediterranean diet into a busy life easier.

Changing the way you fill your plate

Folks on the Mediterranean coast eat many of the same foods that people elsewhere do; they just eat smaller portions and incorporate plenty of vegetables. For example, they may eat pizza, but they eat less pizza; go easy on the sauce, cheese, and other toppings; and add a salad and possibly other side vegetables. This section highlights some of the Mediterranean eating habits you can adopt when you're meal planning. These small changes make all the difference in health and flavor.



When you think of a Mediterranean lifestyle and dietary patterns, the focus is on the traditional habits seen at least 50 years ago in the regions noted in this chapter. If you visited northern Italy in a recent trip, you may not have experienced any of the dietary patterns promoted in this book — and no, that huge portion of butter-laden pasta you had doesn't qualify for this diet.

Focusing on plant-based foods

As noted earlier, the Mediterranean climate makes for abundant amounts of fresh fruits and vegetables, and people from the region use what they have on hand. As a result, they eat a lot of plant-based foods (five to ten daily servings of fruits and vegetables) and depend less on prepackaged convenience foods. A typical American diet, on the other hand, includes about three servings of fruits and vegetables a day on average, and prepackaged foods are the go-to items for many meals.

Getting the five to ten fruits and vegetables servings a day is easier when you consider that beans and lentils commonly take the place of smaller meat portion. (See the upcoming section “Finding the right balance with protein” for information on changing your protein mindset.)

Consuming whole grains rather than processed grains

Incorporating whole grains into your daily meal plans provides a great source of complex carbohydrates, fiber, vitamins, and minerals; it also adds flavor and texture to your meals. The trick is to use grains as a smaller side dish to avoid eating too many calories and increasing your blood sugar with too many carbohydrates. Use one-half to one cup of grains with your meals to stay on the healthy side of the fence.



Although people on the Mediterranean coast frequently use pasta, they also consume many other grains, such as bulgur wheat, barley, and cornmeal. Chapter 11 tells you everything you need to know about grains, and Chapter 14 offers cooking tips that make including grains in your meals easy.

Finding the right balance with protein

As we explain earlier, meat is typically a side dish in the Mediterranean diet; when meat does serve as the main dish, it's in a smaller portion size than you're probably used to. Thinking of meat as anything but an entree may be difficult. If you're a meat lover, you may be just about ready to put this book on the shelf because you think you have to give up your favorite foods. Wait! You don't have to become vegetarian to live a Mediterranean lifestyle.



Incorporating this lifestyle is more about eating less and adding more variety to your plate than about depriving yourself completely. The goal isn't to abandon animal protein but simply to eat less of it and more of plant-based protein.



If you feel like this lifestyle isn't for you, consider going halfway. Eating your normal portions of meat two to three days a week and going a more Mediterranean route on the other days may work better for you. If you aren't willing to give up your regular portion of steak, look for other places in the meal where you can incorporate Mediterranean concepts. Start with what you're comfortable with; even a partial change in your habits can make a big difference in your overall health.

Enjoying the Health Benefits Linked to the Mediterranean Diet

The Mediterranean diet has long been touted for providing health benefits, such as reducing coronary artery disease and decreasing the risk of some cancers. Including fresh vegetables and fruits, legumes, and healthy fats into your diet can help improve your health in many ways. Although Chapter 2

provides a more detailed overview of the health benefits and Part II discusses in detail the many chronic conditions that a Mediterranean eating plan can help mitigate, here's a quick rundown of the ways the diet benefits you:

- ✔ **Promoting heart health:** Heart disease is the number one cause of death in the United States, even though a few lifestyle changes make most cases of heart disease easily preventable. Studies show that a traditional Mediterranean diet decreases death from coronary artery disease by 9 percent and lowers blood pressure, blood sugar, and triglyceride levels. Chapters 3 and 4 cover heart disease, hypertension, and stroke.
- ✔ **Battling diabetes:** The foods in a Mediterranean diet make perfect sense for a person with type 2 diabetes because the food choices lean toward being low-glycemic, which convert to sugar more slowly and therefore tend not to cause blood sugar levels to spike. The portion sizes in the Mediterranean diet can also make a significant difference in keeping total carbohydrate intake during the meal in check. Chapter 5 provides the details on diabetes.
- ✔ **Fighting cancer:** Specific staples of the Mediterranean diet have been shown to provide cancer-preventing and cancer-fighting benefits. Head to Chapter 7 for details on that disease.
- ✔ **Losing weight:** Obesity is an epidemic in the U.S. and is becoming a major health problem around the world. Therefore, weight loss is an important issue for many people (and perhaps you). If you want to lose some weight, the Mediterranean diet is the way to go. Be forewarned, however: A Mediterranean diet isn't a traditional "diet" or a quick fix. Rather, it's a series of healthy lifestyle choices that can get you to your weight loss goal while you eat delicious, flavorful foods and get out and enjoy life. Chapter 6 has details on the dangers associated with being overweight and how the Mediterranean diet can help.
- ✔ **Aging gracefully:** A Mediterranean lifestyle can help you feel and look your best. A diet high in nutrients, moderate activity, and lots of laughter with friends lets you enjoy the benefits of health! Head to Chapter 2 for the details on the ways you can age gracefully with a Mediterranean lifestyle.



Research shows that following a traditional Mediterranean diet significantly reduces the risk of heart disease and cancer, can help prevent or mitigate the problems associated with other chronic health conditions, and can offer all sorts of other benefits. The key word, however, is *traditional*. The Mediterranean region is changing, with faster-paced lifestyles and more modern conveniences. These changes bring with them an increased prevalence of heart disease and cancer. To get benefits from the Mediterranean diet, you need to follow the traditional diet.

