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Eating for Brain Health

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EASY WAYS TO ‘MEDITERRANEAN-ISE’ YOUR DIET

Eat more vegetables by:

• Spreading avocado on toast instead of butter or margarine.
• Making a toasted sandwich better by packing in more vegetables – not just cheese and tomato, but cheese and tomato, baby spinach leaves and sliced mushrooms or capsicum.
• Adding extra veg to a pasta sauce, a casserole or a curry – like extra tomatoes, some grated carrot, sliced zucchini, capsicum or peas.
• Adding more leaves. Leaves aren’t just for salads. You can add green leaves like spinach, bok choy, kale or dark red salad leaves like radicchio to curries, soups, risottos and pasta sauce at the end of cooking. They wilt into the food in seconds, adding add colour and extra nutrients.
• Making a batch of roast vegetables. This is food that cooks itself without messing up the kitchen – and roasting brings out the sweetness of vegetables. Line a roasting pan with foil and chop vegetables e.g. – chunks of pumpkin, sweet potato or zucchini, red onion peeled and cut into quarters. Beetroot is good roasted whole. You can also roast whole mushrooms and cauliflower flowerettes. Add fresh herbs like thyme or rosemary if you have them. Spray with cooking oil and roast in a hot oven for about 25 minutes or until the vegetables are cooked. You can eat them hot as a side dish to fish or meat, or add them cold to sandwiches and salads.
• Eating veg on toast. One of Italy’s greatest gifts is bruschetta – bread toasted in the oven with a little olive oil and topped with raw chopped tomato mixed with a little garlic and olive oil. Try other vegetables too like cooked mushrooms or spinach. Pine nuts add extra flavour.

Get more omega-3 fats in your diet

Fish is the best source of omega-3 fats but there are some plant sources too.

• Eat 2 – 3 serves of oily fish a week. Canned fish is good, including sardines.
• Walnuts. Snack on them or crush them and add to salads, muffins or rice dishes, or toss them through roast vegetables.
• Soy beans – canned ones are available in some supermarkets. Drain and add to salads – they soak up the flavour of a good oil and vinegar dressing.
• Chia seeds – good added to muesli or to homemade muffins.
• Linseed (flaxseed). Good added to muesli – they have a nice nutty flavour and texture. You need to eat them ground not whole, in order to digest them, but don’t buy the pre-ground ones – they deteriorate quickly once they’re ground so it’s best to grind them freshly yourself with an electric coffee grinder and store them in the fridge.

Use olive oil for cooking and salad dressings.

The use of olive oil is thought to be one reason why a Mediterranean style of eating is so healthy. It may be because it’s high in antioxidants (at least if it’s extra virgin olive oil or virgin olive oil) or because it makes vegetables taste so good people eat more of them. The best choice because of its high antioxidant content is extra virgin olive oil, but virgin olive oil is also relatively high in antioxidants.
Love your legumes.

Legumes include lentils, chickpeas, red kidney beans, split peas, cannellini bean, borlotti beans, soybeans and black beans and they have big health benefits. Besides being high in protein, fibre, vitamins and minerals, legumes are linked to a lower risk of diabetes, heart disease and bowel cancer – and they’re an inexpensive base for creating curries, casseroles, soups and salads. The traditional way to cook legumes is to soak dried beans before cooking (lentils are the exception – you can cook them without soaking). An easier alternative is buying canned legumes at the supermarket.

- How do you cook legumes? Making a pasta sauce, casserole or curry with beans or lentils is much like cooking with minced or chopped meat or poultry – kick off with cooking some onions and garlic, then toss in your legumes and other ingredients. Easy.
- Including legumes in a dish doesn’t mean it has to be a meatless meal. You can just use less meat instead and pump up the volume with legumes. Good combinations are chicken with chick peas, and beef with black beans, red kidney beans, or borlotti beans.
- Adding drained, canned legumes to a salad is an easy way to add protein, fibre, texture and filling power.

Easy Salad Dressing

The best salad dressing is the one you make at home. Try different vinegars – red wine vinegar and sherry vinegar are good. As a rough guide, use half extra virgin olive and half white balsamic vinegar and add your own favourite flavours like crushed garlic, Dijon-style mustard, honey, chilli, lemon-zest or all of the above!

Recipe

- ¼ cup olive oil
- ¼ cup white balsamic vinegar
- 1 crushed clove of garlic
- 1 tspn honey
- Squirt of lemon juice
- Grated rind of half a lemon
- Pinch of chilli flakes

Add some nuts

A number of studies suggest that eating 30g of plain unsalted nuts at least five times a week reduces heart disease risk by 30 to 50 per cent, a result that’s probably due to a mix of different effects on the body. One is that nuts naturally contain plant sterols (the same substances added to cholesterol-lowering margarines), as well as antioxidants that help keep arteries healthy. Nuts are great as a snack and a good way to add flavour, texture and protein to dishes, e.g.

- Crushed walnuts or pecans tossed in a salad
- Cashews added to a stir fry or curry
- Crushed walnuts or pecans added to muffins

Want to know more about the benefits of a Mediterranean Diet and how to put it into practice in your own kitchen? I’d recommend The Mediterranean Diet by Dr Catherine Itsiopoulos (who’s both a nutrition scientist and a good cook with a Greek background) published by Pan MacMillan, RRP $34.99.

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