Food and Fitness

Feed Your Heart: "Greece is the Word!"

When nutrition researchers went to Greece more than 50 years ago, they discovered that the diet and lifestyle of the Greeks contributed to the "lowest rates of heart disease and the highest life expectancy in the world at that time," says Walter Willett, director of nutrition research at the Harvard School of Public Health.



As part of the Seven Countries Study, citizens of the Isle of Crete were found to have the most health-promoting lifestyle, including diet, of all countries studied. Because these Greeks consumed a large amount of olives and olive oil, the popularity of this oil has soared over the past 50 years. But, was olive oil alone the secret to their good health? Hardly.



Researchers continue to analyze what made the diet and lifestyle of the Greeks so healthy. Was it an abundance of grape leaves, cu-

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Web sites of interest:

- http://go4life.niapublications.org/
- http://nihseniorhealth.gov/exerciseforolderadults
- http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/

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Feed Your Heart: "Greece is the Word!"

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cumbers, olives, whole grains and fish? Or was it the hard working, fun-loving way of living that protected these people from the ravishes of heart disease that we see in today's America.



Both high LDL (bad) cholesterol and inflammation are recognized risk factors for heart disease. It is well known that olive oil does not increase LDL cholesterol and may even help to lower it. It is also known that fish are a source of omega 3 fatty acids which reduce overall inflammation. In addition omega 3 fatty acids may lower triglycerides and protect against some abnormal heart rhythms.



Plant foods (vegetables, fruits, and whole grains) were an important part of the Greek diet as well. Vegetables are rich in antioxidants, which may help keep blood vessels more flexible.



While we may not be able to replicate exactly the lifestyle of the Greeks— hard work in the fields, siesta after lunch, red wine with meals or dancing the night away— we **can** try to replicate some points of their eating style. Amy Jo Lanou, associate professor of health and wellness at the University of North Carolina-Ashville, emphasizes that "the benefits of [the Greek] diet aren't the result of a single nutrient, but complex combinations of the nutrients found in whole foods, perfectly balanced to provide everything the body needs."



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Thoughts about special ingredients unique to Greek cooking:

- The olive tree is the blessed tree of the Greeks and its fruit has been part of the cuisine since ancient times. Hence, olive oil is the preferred oil to use in Greek recipes. It has a unique flavor and has a cultural link to the financial and social interests of thousands of Greek families.



- Greeks love spices and use them frequently to give a distinctive flavor to their foods. Garlic, oregano, dill, cumin and cinnamon are just a few of their favorites. Modern spice companies (Cavender's, McCormick) combine some of these spices and simply call it "Greek Seasoning." If you can't find this in your supermarket create your own by using equal proportions of oregano, garlic powder, onion powder, mint, thyme, basil, and marjoram. Add a little black pepper, salt, cinnamon, and nutmeg and adjust according to your preference. OPA! You are cooking like a Greek!



- Wine is the main drink associated with Greek food. A good meal is usually accompanied by a glass of the appropriate wine. In antiquity, wine was drunk not only by men and the elderly but also by women and children. However, they never consumed it if it was not mixed with water beforehand, at a ratio of 3 parts water to one part wine. Ancient Greeks did not praise excessive consumption of wine and intoxication. (Greek Cooking, 2002, Athens, Greece)



Try the recipes in **Recipe Corner** for some unusual combinations of high fiber, healthy protein, and antioxidants. Some recipes will only take a few minutes to prepare but one recipe is for cooks who want a challenge. Perhaps a sampling of Mediterranean food will make you feel like you've been to Greece and back!

Recipe Corner

Grilled Chicken Kabobs

Marinade:

1 tsp. lemon zest

2 Tbs. lemon juice

2 Tbs. olive oil

1 Tbs. Greek seasoning

Salt and black pepper to taste

Kabobs:



2 boneless, skinless chicken breasts, sliced thinly

2 plum tomatoes, quartered

½ red onion, cut in ½ inch chunks

Stir marinade ingredients together and set aside. Prepare chicken, then pour marinade over meat to coat. Cover and refrigerate for about an hour.

Skewer chicken, tomatoes and onions alternately on bamboo or metal skewers. Grill over a charcoal fire about fifteen minutes, or until chicken is done. Serve with Tzatziki, a yogurt sauce.



Tzatziki

This sauce is a must with everything Greek, especially meats, salads, and pita bread. Using Greek non fat yogurt and cucumbers provides low fat and high fiber, a winning combo for heart health! It's also great as a dip!

1 cucumber, peeled and chopped finely

Salt

1½ cups fat-free Greek yogurt

3+ garlic cloves, crushed

2 Tbs. chopped fresh dill or 1 Tbs. dried dill

2 Tbs. extra virgin olive oil

1 Tbs. red wine vinegar

Place the cucumber in a bowl, sprinkle with salt, and let stand for 30 minutes.

Rinse the cucumber well to remove the excess salt. A handful at a time, squeeze out the excess liquid from the cucumber.

Place the cucumber in a bowl. Add the yogurt and stir. Add the garlic, dill, olive oil, and vinegar and mix well. Cover with plastic wrap and chill until needed. Prepare ahead. The dip can be refrigerated for up to one day; stir before serving.



Source: http://recipes.aarp.org/recipes/tzatziki

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Recipe Corner

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Cucumber, Tomato and Black Olive Salad

4 large plum tomatoes, cored, cut into 3/4-inch pieces
1/3 cup black olives (such as Kalamata), pitted, halved
1/3 cup very thinly sliced red onion
1 small cucumber, thinly sliced
2 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
1 Tbs. balsamic vinegar
2 cloves garlic, pressed
1 teaspoon Greek seasoning
1 large bunch salad greens

Combine tomatoes, black olives, onion, and cucumber in medium bowl. In a small jar combine olive oil, balsamic vinegar; garlic and seasoning; shake to blend well. Pour dressing over these ingredients, and serve over salad greens. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

Mujadara (Rice, Lentil, and Caramelized Onion Pilaf)



2 T. butter
2 T. olive oil
3 pounds white onions, sliced moderately thinly
1/2 cup white wine or vermouth (optional)
1/2 c brown or green lentils
2 c. brown rice
1/4 t. ground cinnamon
1/4 t. ground cumin
Salt and pepper
Flat leaf parsley for serving

Melt the butter along with the oil and small amount of salt in your largest skillet, and add the onions. Set heat on medium-low and stir occasionally until very soft, about 45 minutes.



Turn heat to medium high and keep cooking and stirring often until deeply browned (caramelized), about 20 minutes. As mixture dries in cooking add the white wine or vermouth, (or water) and stir into the onions to get more flavor.

Meanwhile, cook the rice and the lentils separately according to package directions for each. Avoid overcooking lentils so they retain their shape. Drain any excess liquid after they are cooked. When everything is cooked, fold the rice, lentils, spices, half of the onions, and more salt and pepper together in a large bowl. Taste and adjust seasonings. To serve, form a large mound. Top with the remaining caramelized onions, chopped parsley and a grind of fresh black peppercorns. Serve with Greek yogurt tzatziki. http://herbivoracious.com/2007/10/recipe-mujadara.html

Exercise for Your Heart



You know that exercise and activity are good for you—good for every part of you! Research proves that regular exercise can help to prevent or delay the onset of diseases like diabetes, osteoporosis and heart disease.



Exercise can improve your balance and strengthen your muscles. This will help you to perform activities of daily living and to stay independent. Regular physical activity helps you have more energy and can also help to reduce depression. To put it simply, exercise makes you feel better!



February is "American Heart Month". It's a great time to start an exercise program if you have never exercised or to freshen up your current program. You don't need special clothes or fancy equipment—you just need determination and a good pair of walking shoes.

The American Heart Association and the National Institutes of Health recommend adults get:

- at least 30 minutes of aerobic exercise on most days of the week
- some sort of strength training
- stretching and flexibility exercises.

Aerobic exercise is activity that increases your heart rate and maintains it at a higher rate for a sustained period of time. Aerobic exercise is all about moving and can include:

- walking
- jogging
- swimming
- biking
- water aerobics
- tai chi

It's easier if you choose something you **like** to do, something you **can** do, and something you **will** do. Does it always seem like there is not enough time in the day for exercise? Considering that there are 1440 minutes in a day, scheduling 30 minutes of aerobic exercise will take up only 2% of your day!

If you have been inactive recently, start with 5-10 minute intervals of activity and gradually build up stamina. For example, try these activities:



- walking on a golf course
- walking up and down stairs



- working in the yard
- walking on a treadmill
- dancing

Thirty minutes of continuous exercise is optimal. However, if you are unable to reach this goal, you can still benefit from 30 minutes of accumulated exercise

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throughout the day.



Set a pace that's comfortable for you. The best way to determine exercise intensity is to pay attention to your breathing. You should have enough breath to talk while you are exercising without huffing and puffing.



Recent research says that older adults should include strength training in their exercise routine. There are numerous options for strength training equipment. If you don't have access to weight machines or a gym you can use stretch bands such as Dynabands, hand-held weights, or household items like cans of food, bottles of water, or quart-sized milk cartons.

You'll want to start with light resistance and gradually increase the weight or degree of resistance. An exercise professional can give you tips about proper form and technique.

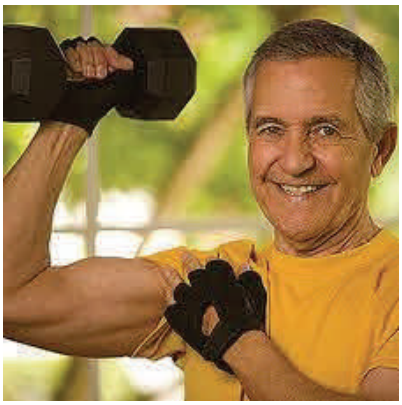
If you are having trouble getting motivated to start or stick with your exercise program, try enlisting the aid of your friends. You can support each other! During the winter months joining your friends to walk at the mall or to do resistance training at the senior center is a great way to resume your exercise if you have taken a break during the holidays.

In October 2011, the National Institute on Aging at the National Institutes of Health kicked off the **Go4Life campaign**. This program focuses on fitness for older adults.



This exercise and activity campaign is designed to help you fit exercise and physical activity into your daily schedule. The interactive website contains a wealth of information about exercise. You can watch instructional videos and download forms for tracking your exercise and activity. You can learn more about the Go4Life campaign at: **http://www.go4life.niapublications.org**

If you are unable to access this website at home ask for help at your local library or Senior Center. More information about exercise for seniors may be found at: **http://nihseniorhealth.gov/exerciseforolderadults**



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News You Can Use

Eat Your Plants! A New Reason to Heed the Same Old Advice!

Older adults who eat more plants have an 18% lower risk of dying from heart disease or stroke than those who eat fewer servings of vegetables and fruits. A study published in the *January 4, 2012 American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* followed 100,000 older adults over 7 years. Study author Marjorie L. McCullough believes this protection can be credited to flavonoids and other plant nutrients which serve as protective antioxidants and anti-inflammatory agents.



Cardiovascular Lifetime Risk Pooling Project

High blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, and smoking are risk factors for heart disease. Having these problems in middle age signals the likelihood that a person will suffer from heart disease later in life. After looking at data from over a quarter of a million people investigators in this study concluded men with 2 or more risk factors at age 55 were 7 times as likely to have a heart event by age 80 as those with none (3 times as likely for women). This information further supports the need to address healthy lifestyle earlier in life for heart disease prevention.