

Differences and Similarities:

The DASH Diet vs Mediterranean Diet

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It's almost too good to be true – foods like whole grain pasta, seafood, nuts, fruits, beans and olive oil are not only nutritious and delicious but about as healthy as it gets.

Some experts consider the “Mediterranean diet” – rich in plant foods and monounsaturated fats – to be the poster child for a healthy diet. The Mediterranean diet has long been associated with heart health, longevity and more benefits. Beyond that, it can also be an excellent weight loss plan, as long as you eat in moderation.

The DASH diet – Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension— is also considered by experts to be among the healthiest meal plans. In fact, it is the only other specified diet plan used as an example in the Dietary Guidelines as a model for healthy eating for everyone. It was conceived after a research study demonstrated that a diet rich in primarily plant foods could lower blood pressure. Following a DASH plan can lower blood pressure within two weeks and can also be an excellent weight loss plan.

Following either a DASH or Mediterranean diet is an investment in good health. “The Dash and Mediterranean diets provide similar recommendations with their strong base of fruits, vegetables, whole grains and healthier fats from oils and nuts” says Connie Diekman, MED, RD and author of *The Everything Mediterranean Diet Book*.

Contrasting the Plans

The macronutrient content of both diets plans were compared along with Omni Heart, Zone, Atkins, South Beach and Ornish in a 2008 study in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*^[2] Researchers analyzed seven day meal plans to assess macronutrient composition.

The table presents their findings which includes the macronutrient differences between the DASH and Med diets.

Nutrient	DASH Diet	Med Diet	IOM
Carbohydrates	53%	38%	45-65%
Protein	20%	16%	10-35%
Total Fat	28%	46%	20-35%
Saturated fat	<6%	7%	AHA 7%
Polyunsaturated fat	7%	7%	5-10%
Monounsaturated fat	12-13%	28%	No recommendation
Cholesterol	136 mg/ 2000 calories	337 mg	AHA 300 mg

Source: AJCN 2008

In general, the DASH diet is closer to a high carb, low fat plan whereas the Med diet is more like a low carb, high fat plan.

“Both plans are nutrient rich yet there are striking differences, specifically in types and amounts of carbs, fat, alcohol and protein sources” says Columbia University researcher, Wahida Karmally, DrPH, RD.

DASH Diet Plan

The DASH diet eating plan lowers blood pressure, cholesterol and promotes weight loss when consumed in combination with physical activity.^[6]

One of the primary features of the DASH diet is consuming less sodium (1500-2400 mg/day) and fat (of all kinds) while eating more plant based foods, less poultry, fish, nuts and very small amounts of red meat, sweets and sweetened beverages.

Most DASH plans are based on the standard reference 2000 calorie diet (<http://www.dashdiet.org/default.asp>) including:

- 4-5 servings fruits
- 4-5 servings vegetables
- 2-3 servings low fat or non fat dairy
- 7-8 servings grains
- 2 or less servings of lean meat, poultry or fish
- 4-5 servings nuts, seeds, beans per week
- 2-3 servings fats and oils
- <5 servings of sweets per week

Eggs are not typically eaten on the DASH diet but Karmaly says there is room at the table for them. “Eggs have lots of good nutrition; excellent source of protein, lutein, iron, vitamin D and low in saturated fat” she says. It is noteworthy that eggs are now lower in cholesterol from 220 mg down to 185 mg per large egg. According to the AHA, an egg a day is OK for healthy adults.

Mediterranean Diet Plan

There is no one Med diet, instead it is a dietary pattern of fresh, seasonal, less processed and healthy foods – dependent on the country of origin. Generally, most plans emphasize a plant based diet with moderate amounts of dairy (not necessarily low fat), a broader selection of protein sources, plenty of heart healthy monounsaturated fats and alcohol. Portion sizes and number of servings are provided in general terms.

The basic Mediterranean diet pattern as defined by the nonprofit organization, Oldways in conjunction with the Harvard School of Public Health scientists (<http://www.oldwayspt.org/mediterraneandiet>).

Eat sparingly: meats and sweets

Small portions: poultry, eggs, and dairy (daily-weekly)

Twice weekly: fish and seafood

Daily: fruits, vegetables, grains (preferably whole), beans, seeds, nuts, legumes, herbs, spices, and olive oil

Alcohol: moderation

Evidence is compelling for both plans says Harvard's Eric Rimm, ScD, "People are driven by what they like to eat and some may find the broader range of foods, flavors and availability of the Med diet preferred over the DASH plan."

A recent study in the *British Medical Journal* ^[4] suggests the health benefits of the Med diet come primarily from moderate consumption of alcohol, low consumption of meat and meat products and high consumption of vegetables, fruits, nuts, olive oil and legumes. The overall dietary pattern and lifestyle were also credited.

Additionally, the Mediterranean lifestyle includes leisurely dining, family enjoyment and regular physical activity.

Research on the Health Benefits of DASH and Mediterranean Diets

Both plans have been extensively researched and are highly recommended. Emerging research suggests the benefits go beyond heart health and longevity and include reduced risk of chronic diseases such as diabetes, cancer, dementia and Alzheimers.^[7]

Studies show that calorie-controlled diets rich in plant foods, healthy fats, and lean protein – like the Mediterranean diet – are a nutritious formula for weight loss. A study in the *New England Journal of Medicine* found that a Mediterranean diet was as effective as a low-fat diet for losing weight and also offered some metabolic benefits.

Two different studies showed that both plans can improve cognitive function when combined with exercise. A 2010 study in the journal *Hypertension* shows the DASH diet improved brain function by 30% as well as lowered blood pressure and weight loss in overweight adults. And a study in the August 2009 *Journal of the American Medical Association*, suggests people who follow a Med diet have slower age-related mental decline.

Recent studies show both diets reduce the risk of colorectal cancer with the DASH diet plan being more effective. The DASH plan with a higher intake of whole grains, fruit, and vegetables; moderate amounts of low fat dairy and lower amounts of red or processed meats, desserts, and sweetened beverages was associated with a lower risk of colorectal cancer.^[1]

A study in the January 2011 *Diabetes Care* found Med diets without calorie restriction were effective in the prevention of diabetes in people at high cardiovascular risk.^[3]

Bottom Line

Both diets come highly recommended by nutrition experts because of the health benefits associated with plans that are based on a wide variety of nutrient rich healthy foods. Nutrient rich eggs can fit nicely within the guidelines of both diets and provide an excellent source of high quality protein, vitamin D, vitamins, minerals, lutein and a lower dose of cholesterol.

Each offers an exciting and adventurous plan due to the many wonderful flavors from plants. But it takes time and effort in the kitchen and careful portion control says Karmally, "adding more of the foods from either plan is an excellent way to improve diet quality but be careful to control portions to avoid weight gain and undermine the healthfulness of the plan."

Beyond the healthy profile of each diet is compliance – diets need to be tailored to the individual so they are an enjoyable and sustainable way of eating. *

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MESSAGES

- Both the DASH and Mediterranean diets provide health benefits based on including a wide variety of nutrient rich foods.

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