

THE JOURNAL ON

# ACTIVEAGING®

January/February 2018, Vol. 17 No. 1

## The nutrition issue

### **Nutrition for healthy aging**

Dietary strategies to care for mind and body

### **'Stepping Up Your Nutrition'**

Educating clients about diet's role in falls prevention

### **Healthy & delicious**

Why the Mediterranean Diet is a 'diet for the ages'

### **Embracing the 'Pinnacle'**

NuStep's award winners share keys to wellness engagement

*(L to r), Raleigh County  
Commission on Aging's Terri Tilley  
and Spring Lake Village's Diane  
Waltz represent the 2018 NuStep  
Gold Pinnacle Award winners*

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**CEO & PUBLISHER**

Colin Milner, colinmilner@icaa.cc

**EDITOR-IN-CHIEF**

Jennifer Milner, jenifermilner@icaa.cc

**EDITOR**

Tammy Ditmore

**ASSOCIATE EDITOR**

Mary E. Sanders, PhD, CDE®,  
ACSM-RCEP, FACSM

**CONTRIBUTING EDITORS**

Marilynn Larkin, MA; Patricia Ryan, MS

**ART DIRECTOR**

Jacob Benaroch

**CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER**

Julie Milner, juliemilner@icaa.cc

**CHIEF OF RESEARCH AND  
EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT**

Kathie C. Garbe, PhD, kathiegarbe@icaa.cc

**DIRECTOR OF MARKET DEVELOPMENT**

Patsy LeBlanc, patsyleblanc@icaa.cc

**COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR**

Marilynn Larkin, MA, mlarkin@icaa.cc

**CONVENTION MANAGER**

Dawn Norman

**LEAD SERVICES**

Shari Akesson

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**International Council on Active Aging®**

603-1112 West Pender Street  
Vancouver, BC, V6E 2S1, Canada  
Toll-free: 866-335-9777  
Tel: 604-734-4466  
Fax: 604-708-4464  
[www.icaa.cc](http://www.icaa.cc)

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**The nutrition issue**

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Getting a good night's sleep is an often-overlooked key to health and wellness. In this special section, active-aging professionals will find expert advice, tips and handouts to use with clients. *By Marilynn Larkin, MA*



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**ICAA INNOVATORS “Stepping Up Your Nutrition”:  
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A public-private partnership has created a program to educate older adults about the role nutrition plays in improving health and preventing falls.



**CHAMPIONS Aging with grace: Jane Friedman models  
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A “Champion” of active aging shares conversations with someone who inspires him—and reaffirms commonalities in how people age well. *By Maestro David Dworkin, MA*

*Front cover: (L to r), NuStep feted Terri Tilley of Raleigh County Commission on Aging and Diane Waltz of Spring Lake Village at last year’s ICAA Conference. Their organizations won the 2018 NuStep Gold Pinnacle Awards*



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# The Mediterranean Diet:

A way of eating for the ages and for the aging



**Research shows that the flavorful Mediterranean Diet promotes physical and cognitive health. Lifestyle attributes, such as social connections, are also important**

*by Sara Baer-Sinnott, MA*

It seems fitting that as the Mediterranean Diet Pyramid celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary in January 2018, it was also honored as the number one overall diet in America by *US News & World Report's* annual ranking (tied with the DASH diet). Additionally, in the same ranking, experts named the Mediterranean Diet first in Best Diabetes Diets, first (tie) in Best Diets for Healthy Eating, second (tie) in Best Heart-Healthy Diets, first

in Best Plant-Based Diets, and first in Easiest Diets to Follow.<sup>1</sup>

It wasn't always that way.

In the early 1990s Americans were fat-phobic and clamoring for “no-fat” or “low-fat” foods created by food manufacturers anxious to capitalize on the United States government's low-fat dietary policy. To counter the fat phobia craze, and to provide a healthy, research-backed alternative to the US Department of Agriculture's food pyramid introduced in 1992, Oldways brought together a world-class group of nutrition scientists, public policy experts, chefs, and food writers for the 1993 International Conference on the Diets

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of the Mediterranean. The outcome of this groundbreaking conference was the first Mediterranean Diet Pyramid, introduced on January 23, 1993.

Since that time, the Mediterranean Diet has become one of the most widely recommended diets in the world, supported by physicians and nutrition professionals alike. Unlike fad diets that cycle in and out, the Mediterranean Diet is supported by decades of reputable scientific research. Best of all, it is easy to follow, as it celebrates rich flavors and delicious recipes.

## What is the Mediterranean Diet?

The Mediterranean Diet is the eating pattern of people who live around the Mediterranean Sea. While Italian food is different from Spanish or Greek foods, the overall pattern is the same. For example, look at the tomato-bread traditions of the Mediterranean. In Spain, they rub tomatoes on toasted bread with olive oil and call it *pa amb tomàquet*; in Italy, *bruschetta* is toasted bread with ol-

ive oil, tomatoes and basil, and perhaps a bit of mozzarella cheese; in Greece they serve *paximadia*, which are barley rusks topped by chopped tomatoes, feta cheese, oregano, and olive oil. These foods are of a similar pattern, but each has its own regional spin.

The mainstays of the Mediterranean Diet are foods from plants: vegetables and greens, beans, whole grains, fruits, nuts, herbs and spices, and healthy fats like olive oil. On Oldways' Mediterranean Diet Pyramid, all the foods from plants are grouped together at the base, since these ingredients are the foundation of every Mediterranean meal. Given its history in coastal communities, this diet also includes fish and seafood, at least twice per week, plus smaller amounts of dairy products (mostly yogurt and cheese) and poultry, and occasional red meat and sweets.

The Mediterranean Diet is about more than just food as well. Lifestyle attributes—activities and social connections—are also important. The

Mediterranean Diet Pyramid was the first dietary guidance to include these attributes, emphasizing not just physical activity (like walking, dancing or playing soccer), but also the importance of sharing meals amongst friends and family. These images and those of the foods on the Mediterranean Diet Pyramid are shown as guides or inspiration for people old and young. For information on how to use the Pyramid, see the sidebar on page 65.

## Research supports diet's healthfulness

Scientists have intensely studied the eating patterns characteristic of the Mediterranean Diet for more than half a century. It all started with Ancel Keys, a researcher from the University of Minnesota, and the Seven Countries Study.

Shortly after World War II, Keys and colleagues (including Paul Dudley White, later US President Dwight Eisenhower's heart doctor) organized the Seven Countries Study<sup>2</sup> to examine the hypothesis that Mediterranean-eating patterns contributed directly to improved health outcomes. This long-running study examined the health of almost 13,000 middle-aged men in the US, Japan, Italy, Greece, the Netherlands, Finland and then-Yugoslavia.

When the data were examined, it was clear that the healthiest people ate a diet where fruits and vegetables, grains, beans and fish were the basis of daily meals. Topping the chart were residents of Crete. Even after the deprivations of World War II—and in part, perhaps, because of them—the cardiovascular health of Crete residents exceeded that of US residents. Researchers attributed much of the differences to diet.

Out of this extensive work came an understanding that certain Mediterranean eating patterns were remarkably connected with good health. From this conclusion emerged the concept of a

“Mediterranean Diet” that could promote lifelong good health.

In subsequent years, hundreds of additional studies have added to the body of scientific evidence supporting the healthfulness of traditional Mediterranean Diet eating patterns. These studies (many summarized on the Oldways website) show that eating the Mediterranean way may have the following impact, among other benefits:

- lengthen life;
- improve brain function;
- reduce the risk of chronic diseases;
- fight certain cancers;
- lower risk for heart disease, high blood pressure and elevated “bad” cholesterol levels;
- protect from diabetes;
- aid weight loss and management efforts;
- keep away depression;
- safeguard from Alzheimer’s disease;
- ward off Parkinson’s disease;
- improve rheumatoid arthritis.

Of great importance and impact, in February 2013 a study was published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. Called *PREDIMED*, this clinical trial of nearly 7,500 people in Spain revealed that the Mediterranean Diet may reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease by up to 30% and may also reduce the risk for stroke among high-risk patients. The study included adults at risk for heart disease who were assigned to either a low-fat diet, a Mediterranean diet with olive oil, or a Mediterranean diet with nuts. The study’s results were so clear that researchers halted the study early to allow the control group to switch to a Mediterranean eating pattern.<sup>3</sup>

A number of other positive health benefits have been identified in follow-ups to the landmark study. Of the 334 *PREDIMED* participants with data on cognitive function, the scientists found that overall brain function significantly improved for both Mediterranean groups over the four-year experiment, compared with the control group. Specifically, the nuts group significantly improved on tests of memory, while the olive-oil group significantly improved on

tests of reasoning, planning, and problem solving.<sup>4</sup> In other research using data from the *PREDIMED* study, those in the Mediterranean diet groups were 51% less likely to get breast cancer than those advised to follow a low-fat diet.<sup>5</sup>

Though the Mediterranean Diet is a lifestyle for all ages, its benefits are particularly relevant to older populations, especially when it comes to Alzheimer’s disease and brain health.

In a review of 18 studies, encompassing nearly 60,000 adults total, scientists found that closely following a Mediterranean eating pattern was associated with “slower rates of cognitive decline, reduced conversion to Alzheimer’s disease, and improvements in cognitive function.” More specifically, this diet was linked with better memory, executive function (which controls behavior, planning and reasoning), and visual constructs.<sup>6</sup>

Other research comes to similar conclusions. In a study of 674 older patients without dementia in New York City, results suggest that a Mediterranean diet—especially one that encourages fish over meat consumption—was linked with larger brain volumes and could promote brain health, as brain atrophy (brain shrinkage) has been linked with cognitive decline.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the results of a study that examined the relationship between eating and Alzheimer’s in 923 retired adults in Chicago showed that the Mediterranean diet may also cut the risk for this disease.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to supporting brain health over time, eating a Mediterranean diet may help reduce the burden of other issues that older adults struggle with, such as quality of life, or juggling multiple medications. Participants, in a study of over 350 adults in Spain, who most closely followed a Mediterranean diet, were more physically active and had significantly better health-related quality of life.<sup>9</sup> In an Italian study of almost 500 older adults in Rome, the authors concluded that following a Mediterranean diet “might potentially delay the onset of age-related health deterioration and reduce the need of multiple medications.”<sup>10</sup>

## Resources

### Oldways

<https://www.oldwayspt.org>

### Oldways: Mediterranean Diet (Mediterranean Diet Pyramid and other Mediterranean Diet resources)

<https://www.oldwayspt.org/traditional-diets/mediterranean-diet>

## Embracing the diet in older-adult settings

The Mediterranean Diet is a great choice for older people, and not only because of its many, well-researched and well-documented health benefits. In addition, Mediterranean food is full of flavor and great taste. While it’s well known that some individuals experience a loss in their senses of taste and smell as they age, it makes no sense to serve bland, tasteless food with too much sodium in any setting.

For professionals working with older adults as patients, clients, residents or members of senior living communities or seniors centers, the Mediterranean Diet promises to promote health and bring taste and pleasure to one of the highlights of a person’s day: mealtime! Helping individuals share meals with others (as is done in traditional Mediterranean diets) can further contribute to increased pleasure, social connections, satiety and good nutrition. Great taste can make a difference in people’s lives. Consider the difference in taste (and health) between the American standards and their Mediterranean counterparts shown in Figure 1 on page 64.

Embracing the principles of the Mediterranean Diet is very doable in senior settings. We speak from experience. At Oldways, we have worked with Senior Living Residences, a provider based in Boston, Massachusetts, in the organization’s journey to bring this diet to residents and their families.

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# The Mediterranean Diet: A way of eating for the ages and for the aging

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American standards compared with Mediterranean counterparts	
Standards	Mediterranean makeovers
<b>Salads:</b> Iceberg lettuce and shredded carrots, with a dollop of French or Russian dressing	Greek salad with tomatoes, cucumbers, romaine lettuce and oregano, topped with a drizzle of olive oil and lemon
<b>Pasta:</b> Spaghetti with meatballs	Angel hair pasta with shrimp, peas, lemon and black pepper
<b>Soup:</b> Canned tomato soup with too much sodium	Gazpacho or minestrone, with vegetables and less sodium
<b>Dessert:</b> Cake and ice cream	Fruit baked in parchment paper with a dollop of sorbet

**Figure 1.** Comparing American standards and Mediterranean counterparts illuminates the difference in taste between these two diets. Source: Oldways

Inspired by the growing body of evidence that connects the Mediterranean Diet and lower incidences of Alzheimer's and cognitive decline, Senior Living Residences used "brain health" as the inspiration behind moving towards a more Mediterranean menu. In support of those efforts, Oldways has made presentations to the organization's chefs and leadership staff; provided Mediterranean recipes; and our registered dietitian has reviewed menus and continued to work with their chefs and other staff members. In addition, Senior Living Residences has cobranded Oldways' resources and Oldways four-week Mediterranean Menu cookbook for residents and families. The senior living provider also displays the Mediterranean Diet Pyramid poster in its community dining rooms and lobbies, and has involved families with cookbooks, handouts and cooking classes. Education and awareness make a difference.

## 'A diet for the ages'

For older adults, the Mediterranean Diet offers a one-two punch: healthy and delicious. For a population whose appetite is often waning, Mediterranean cooking is a way to bring flavor and fun to meals. Additionally, Mediterranean cooking is a way to enhance taste without a lot of added salt, something many individuals are urged to cut back on. Ultimately, for

professionals concerned about the well-being of older adults, the healthfulness of the Mediterranean Diet is without question. Backed up by hundreds of nutrition research studies, the Mediterranean Diet is a diet for the ages and for the aging.

*Sara Baer-Sinnott, MA, is president of Oldways, a nonprofit food and nutrition organization based in Boston, Massachusetts. Baer-Sinnott has been an instrumental figure at Oldways since joining the staff in 1992 to work on one of the first overseas Symposiums (Food, Culture and Discovery in Spain) and the first International Conference on the Diets of the Mediterranean. She assumed the presidency of Oldways in 2010. Founded more than 25 years ago, the organization is on a mission to bring traditional foods, foodways and lifestyles—ones that are good for people and good for the planet—to people around the world. Oldways is best known for the Mediterranean Diet Pyramid, which it created with the Harvard School of Public Health in 1993, and for the Whole Grain Stamp, helping consumers find whole grains. To learn more, visit <https://www.oldwayspt.org>.*

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## How to use the Mediterranean Diet Pyramid

### Mediterranean Diet Pyramid

*A contemporary approach to delicious, healthy eating*

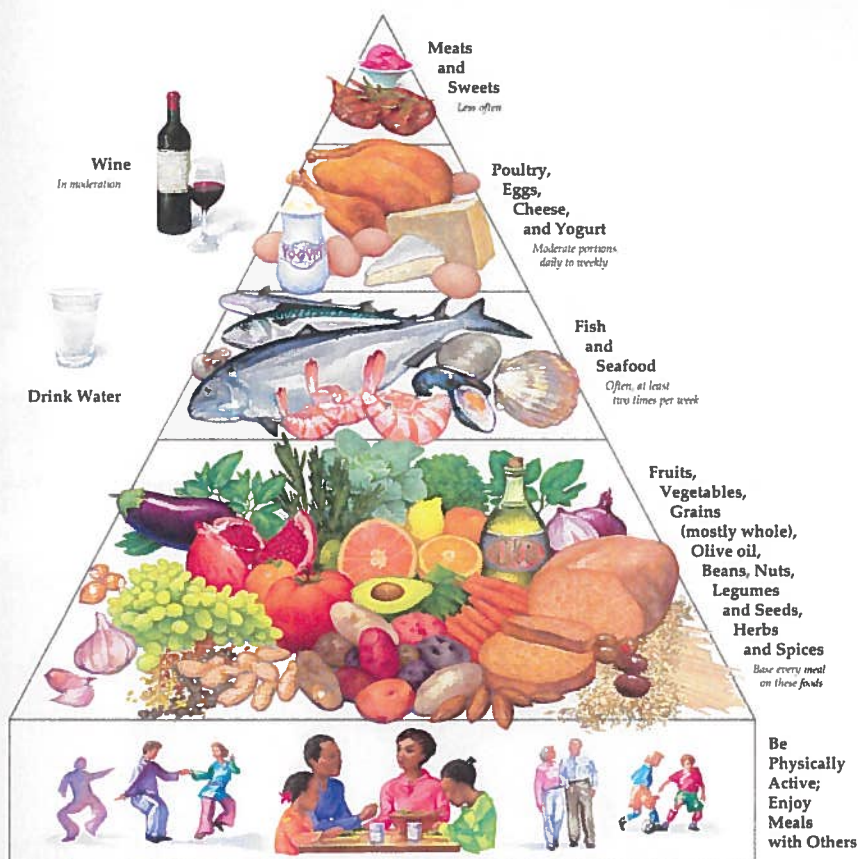


Illustration by George Middleton

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To use the Mediterranean Diet Pyramid as your guide, start from the bottom of the Pyramid (most important) and move up.

#### Look for ways to be more active.

Good food alone isn't enough to live a healthy life. For older adults, this can mean walking outside or in a community, with or without a walker or cane, depending upon mobility. It can also mean a yoga class or low-impact exer-

cise. It definitely means moving as much as is physically possible.

**Eat lots of vegetables.** From a simple plate of sliced fresh tomatoes drizzled with olive oil and crumbled feta cheese to stunning salads, garlicky greens, fragrant soups and stews, healthy pizzas or oven-roasted medleys, vegetables are vitally important to the fresh tastes and delicious flavors of the Med Diet.

**Cook a vegetarian meal one night a week.** Build meals around beans, whole grains and vegetables, and heighten the flavor with fragrant herbs and spices. Down the road, try two nights per week.

**Use good fats.** Include sources of healthy fats in daily meals, especially extra-virgin olive oil, nuts, peanuts, sunflower seeds, olives and avocados.

**Switch to whole grains.** Whole grains are naturally rich in many important nutrients; their fuller, nuttier taste and extra fiber keep you satisfied for hours. Cook traditional Mediterranean grains like bulgur, barley, faro, and brown, black or red rice, and favor products made with whole grain flour.

**Eat seafood twice a week.** Fish such as tuna, herring, salmon and sardines are rich in omega-3 fatty acids, and shellfish including mussels, oysters and clams have similar benefits for brain and heart health.

**Enjoy some dairy products.** Eat Greek or plain yogurt, and try smaller amounts of a variety of cheeses.

**Change the way you think about meat.** If you eat meat, have smaller amounts—small strips of sirloin in a vegetable sauté, or a dish of pasta garnished with diced prosciutto.

**For dessert, eat fresh fruit.** Choose from a wide range of delicious fresh fruits—from fresh figs and oranges to pomegranates, grapes and apples. Instead of daily ice cream or cookies, save sweets for a special treat or celebration.