

WHY PASTA IS HEALTHY

Evidence of Pasta's Health Benefits

There is a consistent and mounting accumulation of nutrition science evidence for the healthfulness of pasta and the pasta meal. The following pages include summaries of recent scientific studies. These recent findings make clear that not only is the pasta itself a health-promoting and nutritious food, but that when it is paired with its “partners” on the plate or in a bowl—olive oil, vegetables, beans, fish or meat—pasta quite dramatically emerges as a nutritionist’s dream.

▲ Med-Style Diets Promote Heart Health

Pasta is a staple of the Mediterranean Diet. In a one-year study, researchers at Pontificia Catholic University in Santiago, Chile “Mediterraneanized” the diet in a workplace cafeteria. 145 workers started the study, and 96 completed every step of the plan. As the workers’ diets more closely approached a Med-style diet (as measured by a peer-reviewed scientific study), waist circumference, HDL (“good”) cholesterol, blood pressure, and other health markers improved significantly.

Public Health Nutrition, September 2009; 12(9A):1635-43.



▲ Pasta Among Foods Associated with Healthy Arteries

A growing movement aims to associate entire eating patterns—rather than nutrients or even individual foods—with better health. At the University of South Carolina, researchers sought to identify food patterns that increase or decrease coronary artery disease. Their research showed greater risk in those who ate a pattern of higher intakes of less healthful foods and lower intakes of more healthful foods (rice, pasta, and poultry).

British Journal of Nutrition, May 2010; 103(10): 1471-9.

▲ Low Carb Diets May Be Harmful

University of Colorado researchers randomly assigned 32 healthy obese adults to either a high fat (low carb) or a high carb (low fat) diet for six weeks. They found that weight loss was similar between both diets, but the high fat (low carb) diet increased LDL (“bad”) cholesterol.

American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, March 2010; 91(3):578-85.



▲ Perceptions vs. Reality in Affordability of Healthy Foods

In Victoria, Australia, scientists at Deakin University wanted to know if financial means and food costs significantly impacted women’s fruit, vegetable, and food consumption. After surveying 1,850 women from 45 neighborhoods, the researchers concluded that the quality of peoples’ diet is linked more to the perception that “good food must cost more,” rather than their financial status. The study suggests that socioeconomic differences in diet are almost completely explained by perceptions of food availability, accessibility, and affordability, not actual cost impediments.

Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health, March 2008; 62(3):191-7.

▲ Med Diet Reduces Risk of Metabolic Syndrome

Metabolic Syndrome is considered to be present if someone has three or more of the following: high blood pressure, high blood sugar, large waist circumference, low HDL (“good”) cholesterol, and high triglycerides. To assess the Mediterranean Diet’s effect on metabolic syndrome, scientists in Greece and Italy conducted an analysis of 50 Med Diet studies involving more than half a million people. The researchers found that the Med Diet improved all five risk factors, and overall reduced the risk of Metabolic Syndrome. They concluded that this dietary pattern can be easily adopted by all population groups and various cultures, and cost-effectively prevent Metabolic Syndrome and its related ailments.

Journal of the American College of Cardiology, 15 March 2011; 57:1299-1313.

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▲ Brain MRIs show Less Disease with Med Diet

Food for thought: Scientists at the Taub Institute for Research in Alzheimer's Disease and the Aging Brain collected MRI data on the brains of 707 elderly New Yorkers. They then studied the diets of these people over 5.8 years and divided the participants into three groups according to Mediterranean Diet adherence. They found that participants in the top-adherence group had 36% less evidence of brain dysfunction (due to blood vessel disease) and that those in the middle group had 22% reduced odds, concluding that higher adherence to the Mediterranean Diet may keep our brains healthier as we age.

Annals of Neurology, February 2011; 69(2): 257-68

▲ Med Diet—and Pasta—Recommended for Kids

Start early: Scientists at the Hospital Virgen del Camino, in Pamplona, Spain compared the diet of high school students to the proven-healthy Mediterranean Diet and determined their scores on the “KidMed” index. They found that diet quality decreases progressively with age, and recommended that students should “increase consumption of fruit, vegetables, nuts, pasta and rice, yogurt and cheese, pulses and fish.”

Anales del Sistema Sanitario de Navarra, aJan-Apr 2010; 33(1):35-42.

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Pasta Fits Into a Weight Loss and Management Program

There is also consistent nutrition science evidence for the role pasta can play in weight loss and management programs. These findings make clear that pasta, by itself or as part of the Mediterranean diet, can contribute to an effective weight loss and management plan. Nutrition scientists also report that high-glycemic index foods tend to elicit greater hunger than do lower-glycemic index foods, such as pasta.

▲ Higher Carbohydrates Can Help Weight Loss

Scientists at the Harvard School of Public Health and Pennington Biomedical Research Center randomly assigned 811 overweight adults to one of four reduced-calorie diets varying in carbohydrate balance. Carbohydrate levels in the four diets were 65%, 55%, 45%, or 35%, but all consisted of similar foods and met guidelines for cardiovascular health. After following the group for two years, the researchers determined that weight loss was similar at 65% or 35% carbohydrate and that all four diets improved the body's defensive functioning against diseases like heart disease and diabetes.

New England Journal of Medicine, 26 February 2009; 360(9):859-73.



▲ Med Diet, Weight Gain, and Aging

Some of us may notice a few extra pounds appear on the scale as we get older. Is this just the reality of getting older? A new study, which followed 10,376 Spanish men and women for about 6 years, has found that following the Mediterranean Diet eating pattern may slow down the weight gain normally observed with age. In fact, people with the lowest Med Diet score gained the most weight each year.

American Journal of Clinical Nutrition. December 2010; 92(6): 1484-93 [Epub Oct 20, 2010]

▲ Lower Carb Diets Linked To Obesity

A Canadian Community Health Survey of 4,451 Canadian adults concluded that consuming a low-carbohydrate diet (a diet with less than 47% carbs) is associated with a greater likelihood of being overweight or obese, among healthy, free-living adults. The lowest risk of excess weight was for those consuming 290 to 310 grams of carbohydrates per day.

Journal of the American Dietetic Association, July 2009; 109(7): 1165-72.

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▲ Why the Mediterranean Diet is Effective for Weight Loss

Focusing on burning enough calories alone rarely results in lasting weight loss, unless meaningful lifestyle and behavioral changes are also added. A team at the University of Murcia in Spain has found that, although many types of diets result in weight loss, the Mediterranean Diet is especially effective because it is suited to the social and daily life of patients and can easily be followed in the long term. Therefore, counseling programs built around the Med Diet are very likely to succeed.

Nutrición Hospitalaria, 2010; 25:9-17.

▲ Low Glycemic Foods Help Reduce Risk of Chronic Disease

Scientists at the University of Toronto reviewed evidence related to glycemic index and health. They concluded that foods low on the glycemic index (GI) are associated with higher levels of HDL (“good”) cholesterol, and that they may decrease the risk of developing diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Some studies have also found a link between high-glycemic foods and certain cancers.

Journal of the American College of Nutrition, August 2009; 28 Suppl:439S-445S.

▲ Benefits of Low-Glycemic Diets over Higher Protein Diets

Although all reduced-calorie diets can achieve weight loss, the challenge is to do so without increasing the risk of chronic disease, and without regaining the weight after the diet concludes. A team of researchers at the University of Sydney reviewed and compared evidence for two types of diets: one low in overall carbs and high in protein, and one high in low-glycemic-index carbohydrates. They concluded that both types of diet result in weight loss, but that the evidence suggested that low-carb diets have the potential for increased risk of disease.

Asia Pacific Journal of Clinical Nutrition, 2008;17 Suppl 1:16-9. Nutrition Reviews, April 2008; 66(4):171-82

▲ Low GI and Low GL Diets Protect Against Chronic Disease

Look to the Index: A team at the University of Sydney found that low GI and/or low GL diets alone reduce the risk of certain chronic diseases. In diabetes and heart disease, the protection is comparable with that seen for whole grain and high fiber intakes. The findings support the general theory that high glycemic foods have a direct link to the development of certain chronic diseases.

American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, 2008; 87:627-37



Pasta And Whole Grains: A Delicious, Healthy Relationship

For extra health benefits, try a whole grain pasta variety for dinner. Whole grains provide a healthy mix of nutrients proven to be beneficial in the fight against heart disease, strokes, type 2 diabetes, even obesity. Pasta is a delicious and family-friendly way to add more whole grains to any diet.

There are a wide range of whole grain pasta options, from gluten-free to 100% whole wheat. Some manufacturers have even created pastas that blend traditional refined semolina with whole grain ingredients. The taste of these whole grain pastas ranges from nutty and rich to smooth and mild, offering options to even the most discerning palate. As with regular pastas, it is always a good idea to prepare whole-grain pastas according to package directions. However, whole grain varieties tend to dry out a bit faster once removed from boiling water, so try to add sauces or coatings as quickly as possible.

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