

Inflammation: Why it Can be Bad and What You Can Do

Dr. Clare Hasler-Lewis (<https://www.linkedin.com/in/clarehaslerlewis/>)

May is [International Mediterranean Diet \(MDiet\) Month](#). This is a great time to reflect on what the MDiet is, and what it can do for your health - like acting as a powerful weapon against the inflammation leading to chronic disease.



What the MDiet Is...And Isn't

First, what it isn't. **It isn't the diet most people eat**, unfortunately. Most people in the U.S. eat a diet **low** in plant foods (fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and nuts), and **high** in red meat and calorie-dense, ultra-processed foods that are rich in saturated fat and added salt and sugar.

Now what the MDiet is. The MDiet reflects the food culture of most Mediterranean countries. As displayed in the [MDiet Pyramid](#), foods at the **top of the pyramid** (red meats and sweets) should be consumed **infrequently**; those at the **bottom of the pyramid** (whole grains, vegetables, fruits, and nuts) should be **consumed daily**, as should olive oil. Olive oil is the most unique feature of the Mediterranean diet. This

popular oil is loaded with natural bioactive compounds (oleanolic acid, oleuropein, oleocanthal, hydroxytyrosol) that are known to reduce [risk of chronic disease, COVID-19 and inflammation](#).

Inflammation - The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

You may be surprised to know that [inflammation can be good](#) - essential, in fact. If you've ever twisted your knee, cut your finger, or suffered a bee sting, you have firsthand experience with "acute" inflammation. It's the resulting pain, redness, swelling, and heat associated with - and essential for - the healing process. But inflammation also has a bad and ugly side. When it becomes "chronic" from smoking, a sedentary lifestyle, and poor dietary habits, [inflammation contributes to a variety of age-related diseases](#), including cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, cognitive disorders, and cancer. But because [dietary factors are the primary driver of the burden of inflammation and thus of chronic disease](#), YOU can do something about it. How? Start by following an anti-inflammatory diet - like the MDiet.

The MDiet Combats Inflammation

A recent review of 14 studies involving over 140,000 people who were followed for as long as 22 years showed that individuals with the highest "[Dietary Inflammatory Index](#)" had a [36% increased risk of cardiovascular disease and mortality](#). Numerous other studies have shown that the [MDiet can serve as a tool to combat inflammation and chronic disease](#), including in [older adults](#).

One easy way to reduce your inflammatory index is replace butter or other solid fats with extra virgin olive oil. For baking, substitute $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of olive oil for 1 cup of butter or other solid fats.