

# Take a trip to the Mediterranean for Heart Health

by Erin McGraw

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*Note: Below is St. Louis District Dairy Council's nutrition article for American Heart Month. It is on the Mediterranean Diet, and there are delicious recipes as well.*

In honor of American Heart Month, try a different approach to healthy eating, specifically the Mediterranean diet. For the first time, the Mediterranean diet is ranked 2019's best overall diet by US News and World Report.

This healthy eating plan is not a strict calorie-counting regimen, but a way of eating that emphasizes fruits, vegetables, low-fat dairy, whole grains, legumes, fish and healthy fats. If you'd like your family to enjoy the healthful benefits of Mediterranean meals, these easy tips can get you started. **Dish Up Dairy** Low-fat dairy is a flavorful part of meals and snacks on the Mediterranean diet, due to its versatility and variety. Choose strong-flavored cheeses like feta or parmesan in small portions to add flavor to your plate.

Enjoy plain, fermented or Greek yogurt as well as low-fat milk, ricotta, and mozzarella cheese. "Dairy foods provide essential nutrients, including 8 grams of protein per serving. It's important to pair protein with other foods at meals and snacks to keep you fuller for longer, and adding dairy will do just that," states Erin McGraw, Nutrition Educator with St. Louis District Dairy Council. **Find More Fiber** Fiber found in whole grains and legumes provides many health benefits, including lowering cholesterol and blood sugar. If you are growing tired of the same high fiber bread, swap it out for brown rice, bulgur, pinto beans or chickpeas. Ancient grains, such as quinoa, amaranth, millet, farro, and spelt all have different tastes and textures. Try a new variety each month as part of your meal planning.

## **Get Friendly With Fruits and Veggies**

The Mediterranean diet emphasizes 7 to 10 daily servings of fruits and vegetables, but how do you get all of those in? Get creative when including them in meals and snacks. Add spinach and peppers to your feta cheese omelet, pair fresh veggies with a seasoned yogurt-based dip, and enjoy an apple with mozzarella cheese instead of crackers.

Dairy compliments both fruits and vegetables and can be a great way to sneak in extra servings, along with a punch of dairy nutrition. For more information on the Mediterranean diet, visit [www.choosemyplate.gov](http://www.choosemyplate.gov). For more information on dairy's health benefits, visit [www.stldairycouncil.org](http://www.stldairycouncil.org) or contact Erin McGraw with St. Louis District Dairy Council: call 314-835-9668 or e-mail [emcgraw@stldairycouncil.org](mailto:emcgraw@stldairycouncil.org). For delicious and nutritious recipes, check us out on Facebook at [STLDairyCouncil](https://www.facebook.com/STLDairyCouncil)

## **Lemon Yogurt Breakfast Bowl**

Enjoy this Greek-inspired breakfast with subtle hints of lemon. Mix up your berry selections for a colorful blend that will fill you up all morning. Yield: 1 serving

Ingredients: 1/4 cup part-skim ricotta cheese 3/4 cup nonfat vanilla Greek yogurt 1 teaspoon lemon zest 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice (or to taste) 1/4 cup raspberries 1/4 cup blueberries 2 tablespoons pecans, chopped Directions:

Combine ricotta cheese, yogurt, lemon zest and fresh lemon juice in a bowl. Stir well.

Top with raspberries, blueberries, and pecans.

Nutrition Facts: 307 Calories, 16 Grams Fat, 22 % DV Calcium, 20 Grams Protein

## **Greek Style Quesadillas**

Serve up these cheesy quesadillas, filled with all of the best Greek-style ingredients. Top with homemade tzatziki sauce for an extra burst of flavor! Yield: 8 servings Serving Size: 1/2 quesadilla; 1/4 cup tzatziki sauce Quesadilla Ingredients: 8 (8-inch) whole wheat flour tortillas 1 (10-ounce) package frozen chopped spinach, thawed and drained 1/2 cup Kalamata olives, chopped 1/2 cup sun-dried tomatoes in olive oil, drained and chopped 2 cups mozzarella cheese, shredded 1 cup feta cheese, crumbled Tzatziki Sauce Ingredients: 1 cup plain Greek yogurt 1 cup cucumber, finely diced 1/2 teaspoon garlic powder 1 tablespoon fresh dill, chopped 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice 1 teaspoon lemon zest salt and pepper, to taste 1 tablespoon olive oil Directions: 1. To make the tzatziki sauce, combine Greek yogurt, cucumber, garlic, dill, lemon juice, and lemon zest in a small bowl; season with salt and pepper, to taste. Drizzle with olive oil. Refrigerate for at least 10 minutes. 2. Preheat oven to 350 degrees F. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper or foil. 3. Top a tortilla with 1/4 of the spinach, olives, sun-dried tomatoes and cheeses, and then top with another tortilla. Repeat with remaining tortillas to make four quesadillas. 4. Place quesadillas onto the prepared baking sheet. Place into oven and bake until the cheese has melted about 10-12 minutes. Let stand 5 minutes. Cut prepared tortillas into quarter sections. 5. Serve immediately with tzatziki sauce. Nutrition Facts: 392 Calories, 22 Grams Fat, 31 % DV Calcium, 19 Grams Protein

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