



Superfoods and the Mediterranean Diet: A Guide to Healthy Eating

Why This Matters (Recovery Context)

The food you eat directly impacts five key biological processes essential for health and healing: your gut microbiome, blood vessel formation (angiogenesis), cell regeneration, DNA repair, and immune function.

Making conscious dietary choices can significantly reduce your risk of major health issues including cardiovascular disease, cancer, depression, and dementia.

A healthy diet helps regulate your body's response to stress (dampening the 'fight or flight' response) and promotes a state of 'rest and digest', which is crucial for overall wellbeing.

Effective dietary change is a two-part process: you must actively add health-promoting 'superfoods' while also removing inflammatory foods that cause harm.

What's Happening in the Brain and Body

Your diet constantly influences these five core defence systems:

Microbiome: The trillions of healthy bacteria in your gut are essential for life. A healthy diet nourishes them.

Angiogenesis: This is the process of growing new blood vessels. Food helps maintain a healthy balance, promoting it where needed (e.g., for wound healing) and restricting it to prevent the growth of cancers.

Regeneration: Your body is always renewing itself by replacing old cells with new ones. A nutrient-rich diet provides the building blocks for this process, helping to slow down ageing.

DNA Repair: Your DNA is constantly being damaged by everyday exposures like sunlight, natural radiation (e.g., radon gas), and even air travel. Certain foods boost your body's natural ability to repair this damage.

Immune Function: Food helps modulate your immune system. It can enhance your ability to fight infections while also calming an overactive immune response, which is important in autoimmune conditions.

The Addiction Lens

This session focused on general health and did not directly link these dietary principles to specific addiction mechanisms like cravings or habit loops. However, the overall goal is to improve physical and mental health, which provides a stronger foundation for recovery. By reducing systemic inflammation and improving mood and brain function, a healthy diet supports the resilience needed to manage addiction.

Core Model or Framework: The Mediterranean Diet

The Mediterranean Diet is an eating pattern, not a strict diet with banned foods. It is based on eating certain foods daily, some weekly, and others only rarely.

Eat Daily:



- A wide variety of coloured vegetables (e.g., eggplant, carrots).
- Cruciferous vegetables (e.g., broccoli, kale).
- Whole grains (e.g., rye, brown rice, not white bread/pasta).
- Legumes (e.g., lentils, chickpeas).
- Nuts and seeds.
- Extra virgin olive oil.

Eat Weekly:

- Fish.
- Chicken.
- Fermented foods like unsweetened yoghurt and some cheeses.

Eat Rarely (e.g., Monthly):

- Red meat.
- Sweets, confectionery, and cakes.
- Deep-fried foods.

What This Looks Like in Real Life

'Superfoods' that support all five defence systems:

- **Vegetables:** Eggplant, carrots, bamboo shoots, fiddlehead ferns.
- **Fruits:** Stone fruit (plums, peaches), kiwi fruit, blueberries (frozen is a good option).
- **Nuts/Seeds:** Walnuts, pumpkin seeds, flax seeds.
- **Specialty Items:** Extra virgin olive oil, dark chocolate (>70% cocoa), squid ink.

The importance of fats: Not all fat is bad.

- **Saturated Fat (Bad):** Solid at room temperature (e.g., animal fat, bacon rind). It clogs arteries by increasing LDL cholesterol.
- **Unsaturated Fat (Good):** Liquid at room temperature.
- **Monounsaturated (MUFA):** Found in extra virgin olive oil and avocados. Helps reduce LDL, increase HDL, reduce blood pressure, and improve insulin sensitivity.
- **Polyunsaturated (PUFA):** Includes Omega-3 and Omega-6.

Omega-3 vs. Omega-6: The ratio is key. The standard Australian diet is too high in inflammatory Omega-6 (ratio of 1:20) and too low in anti-inflammatory Omega-3. Aim for a ratio closer to 1:4.

- **Increase Omega-3:** Eat line-caught salmon, kangaroo meat, or take fish/algae oil supplements.
- **Reduce Omega-6:** Avoid junk food, fried foods, confectionery, and processed seed oils.

Practical Strategies for Recovery

Focus on whole foods: If a product has a long list of ingredients, it is likely processed junk food. Real foods are the ingredients themselves.

Prioritise quality meat: If you eat meat, choose options high in Omega-3. Kangaroo is recommended as it cannot be farmed. If buying beef, it must be from an animal slaughtered directly from pasture, not fattened on corn/soy. Avoid farmed salmon.

Cook with low heat: High-heat cooking (browning, crisping, charring) creates cancer-



causing chemicals via the Maillard reaction. Avoid frying with olive oil at high temperatures; use it for low-heat cooking or as a dressing.

Incorporate nuts daily: Aim for 28g of mixed, unsalted nuts per day to reduce overall mortality. Ensure you include walnuts and at least one Brazil nut for selenium.

Drink tea and coffee: Five cups of tea and/or coffee per day (including decaf) is associated with benefits for the liver, heart, and stroke risk reduction. The benefits of the coffee bean outweigh the negative effects of caffeine.

Avoid inflammatory foods: Actively remove salt, sugar, spirits (alcohol), saturated fats, processed red meat, and refined/fried carbohydrates from your diet.

Common Pitfalls

The 'Pasture-Fed' Trap: Much of the 'grass-fed' beef in supermarkets is finished on a corn and soy diet, which makes the meat high in inflammatory Omega-6 fats. Be extremely cautious unless you can verify the source.

Margarine and 'Healthy' Spreads: Margarine is highly processed and inflammatory. Do not use it, even if fortified with plant sterols.

The High-Fat Myth: The idea that all dietary fat is bad is incorrect. Healthy unsaturated fats from sources like olive oil, avocado, and nuts are essential for good health.

The 'All-or-Nothing' Approach: You don't have to be perfect. The Mediterranean diet is a pattern. Having an unhealthy meal at a family gathering is okay, as long as your overall pattern is healthy. It's about consistency, not perfection.

Key Take-Home Messages

A Mediterranean-style diet, supplemented with extra virgin olive oil and nuts, is proven to reduce overall mortality, cardiovascular disease, cancer, depression, and dementia.

Focus on eating a wide variety of colourful vegetables, whole grains, and healthy fats while minimising red meat, sugar, and processed foods.

The quality of your food matters immensely; prioritise whole, unprocessed foods and be critical of marketing labels.

You must both add good foods and remove bad foods to see a significant benefit. You cannot out-eat a bad diet.

Optional Reflection Questions

Looking at the 'Daily, Weekly, Rarely' list, how does my current eating pattern compare?

What is one inflammatory food I eat regularly that I could reduce or replace?

What is one 'superfood' (e.g., a type of vegetable, nut, or fruit) that I could easily add to my diet this week?

How can I shift my mindset from viewing a meal like 'bacon and eggs' as a treat to seeing it as something that does not support my health goals?