

Foods and health

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Concept of Health – Evolution Over Time

1950: Health = absence of disease.

1948 (WHO): Complete physical, mental & social well-being.

1980s: Health promotion & prevention.

2000s: Psycho-physical well-being & lifestyle.

The meaning of health has changed dramatically. In the 1950s, health was simply not being sick. In 1948, WHO broadened it: health also meant mental and social well-being. By the 1980s, the focus shifted toward prevention — empowering individuals and communities to manage their health as a resource for daily life. Today, health is seen as psycho-physical well-being, meaning the ability to live a balanced life, not just being disease-free.



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Definition of Nutrition

Nutrition = processes by which the body receives & uses nutrients.

Different from supply: way nutrients are delivered.

Nutrition's role:

- Energy for life processes.
- Growth & repair of tissues.
- Regulation of metabolic functions.

Nutrition is the science of how our bodies use nutrients from food. It's not the same as “supply,” which just describes how food is provided. Nutrition ensures that we have enough energy to move and think, supports growth and repair (like building muscles or healing wounds), and regulates processes like hormone production and immunity.



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Basic Goals of Nutrition

Meet energy needs for life processes.

Support growth & maintenance of body structures.

Optimize regulation of biological functions.

Strengthen the body's defense mechanisms.

Every living process — from breathing to thinking — requires energy. Nutrition supplies this energy while also providing raw materials to build and repair tissues. Beyond this, proper nutrition ensures that all regulatory systems (hormones, enzymes, neurotransmitters) function well. This balance helps us resist disease and recover faster.



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Nutrients & Proper Nutrition

Guidelines define required **energy & nutrient intake**.

A proper diet should:

- Prevent deficiencies.
- Build nutrient reserves.
- Support optimal body functions.
- Prevent nutrition-related diseases.

Nutrition guidelines provide the reference values for vitamins, minerals, proteins, fats, and carbs. A good diet prevents deficiencies (like scurvy from lack of vitamin C), ensures we have reserves for stress or illness, supports all body functions, and protects against diet-related diseases such as obesity or diabetes.



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Diet and Disease Prevention

WHO: 1/3 of cardiovascular disease & cancers preventable with diet.

Poor diets increase risk of:

- Obesity & diabetes.
- Cardiovascular disease.
- Cancer.
- Osteoporosis.
- Dental diseases.

Diet plays a direct role in health. WHO estimates that one-third of cardiovascular diseases and cancers could be avoided with healthy eating. Conversely, an unbalanced diet is a leading cause of obesity, diabetes, weak bones (osteoporosis), and poor dental health. Nutrition is therefore one of the most powerful tools of prevention.

Ancel Keys – Father of the Mediterranean Diet

Observed Southern Italy's lower heart disease rates vs USA.

Fat intake similar in quantity, but **different in quality**.

Italians consumed more:

- **Monounsaturated fats (olive oil).**
- **Omega-3 fats (fish).**

Cholesterol strongly linked to diet, not just genetics.

Ancel Keys studied populations in Southern Italy after WWII and compared them to wealthy Americans. Despite eating similar amounts of fat, Italians had fewer heart attacks. Why? Their fats were healthier — olive oil and fish, not butter and red meat. He discovered that cholesterol levels depend more on diet and lifestyle than on genetic background.





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From Food Habits to Diet Model

Traditional Mediterranean intake = based on food availability.

Transition → Mediterranean Diet:

- Guided by medical/scientific knowledge.
- Structured for health promotion.

Mediterranean Diet = international **model of healthy eating**.

Originally, people in the Mediterranean simply ate what was local and seasonal: grains, legumes, vegetables, olive oil, and fish. Over time, researchers and doctors recognized the health benefits and turned it into a structured dietary model — the Mediterranean Diet. It is now promoted globally as a standard for balanced and preventive eating.



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The Mediterranean Diet – UNESCO Recognition

Recognized as **Intangible Cultural Heritage**.

More than food → includes:

- Skills, traditions, rituals in food production & preparation.
- Eating together = cultural identity.
- Social values: hospitality, sharing, sustainability.

The Mediterranean Diet is not only about nutrition — it is a lifestyle and cultural heritage. UNESCO declared it part of the world's intangible cultural heritage. It celebrates farming, fishing, food preparation, and especially eating together, which reinforces family and community bonds. It promotes hospitality, cultural exchange, and respect for nature.

Key Features of the Mediterranean Diet

High in:

- Fruits, vegetables, legumes, whole grains.
- Olive oil (main fat source).
- Fish & seafood.

Moderate in: dairy, poultry, wine.

Low in: red meat, processed foods, added sugars.

The Mediterranean Diet is plant-based, with a focus on fresh fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and legumes. Olive oil provides healthy monounsaturated fats. Fish and seafood are regular protein sources, while dairy and poultry are eaten in moderation. Red meat and processed foods are rare, which helps reduce risks of obesity and heart disease.





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Foods, Nutrition & Well-being – Summary

Health concept evolved → now includes well-being & lifestyle.

Nutrition = energy, growth, regulation.

Proper diet prevents deficiencies & chronic diseases.

Mediterranean Diet = model for balanced eating.

Promotes health, culture, and sustainability.

Health is no longer just about avoiding disease, but about living well physically, mentally, and socially. Nutrition is central to this — providing energy, maintaining growth, and regulating body functions. A good diet not only prevents deficiencies but also protects against chronic diseases. The Mediterranean Diet is an excellent example of a dietary model that combines nutrition, cultural tradition, and sustainability, supporting both individual and community well-being.