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## Meal Planning & The Mediterranean Diet

By Andrea Holwegner BSc, RD

### What is the Mediterranean diet and why is it considered one of the healthiest diets in the world?

The Mediterranean diet, which has been shown by hundreds of peer reviewed scientific journal articles to be one of the healthiest diets on earth for preventing chronic disease including heart disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes and obesity.

The Mediterranean diet is rich in plant-based foods such as grains like pasta and bread, vegetables, fruits, legumes, nuts, seeds, olive oil as well small portions of fish, seafood, lean meat, cheese and wine.

### Can you set the record straight on pasta, which is sometimes mistakenly cut back on due to recent fad diets?

Pasta is often mistaken as one of those foods that we need to cut back due to recent diet fads promoting low-carb and gluten-free diets. However, despite common misconceptions, pasta does provide the perfect foundation for a healthy diet and is part of the Mediterranean diet, considered one of the healthiest diets in the world.

As a complex carbohydrate, and when cooked al dente, most pastas have a low Glycemic Index value, making it a great way to get grain-based foods into your diet. Low Glycemic Index foods promote satiety and go into the blood stream slowly preventing blood sugar rushes, which is better for your health.

In addition, it's tasty, easy to make and can be a source of B-vitamins and fibre.

To benefit from even more nutrients from your pasta meals, consider adding Barilla PLUS pasta into your weekly dinnertime routine. Barilla PLUS is a new premium, multigrain pasta which contains protein, fibre and omega-3 polyunsaturated fatty acids. It tastes great and it's a quick and easy solution for providing a delicious balanced meal that even the pickiest eaters in your family will enjoy.

### What are some simple ways we can incorporate Mediterranean eating patterns here in Canada?

Start with a good quality pasta cooked al dente and toss with homemade or purchased pesto, diced tomatoes and top with ricotta cheese, parmesan cheese, toasted nuts or sautéed shrimp. Serve with a green salad.

Summer is a great time to make a pasta salad with a vinaigrette made with olive oil, balsamic vinegar and herbs) and loads of raw or grilled veggies. Add black or green olives and chick peas to complete the meal.

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One of the simplest and easiest Mediterranean style salads is a caprese salad. All you need is good quality tomatoes, fresh basil, bocconcini cheese (fresh mozzarella cheese sold in delis in containers as large balls) and olive oil. To make as a full meal rather than as just a side salad make a larger quantity and serve with a baguette or bean salad. Alternatively prepare the caprese salad on a pizza shell and cook.

Since most people need to eat more veggies try some of the popular Mediterranean style veggies such as eggplant, arugula or broccoli rabe. Try grilled eggplant slices brushed with olive oil and garlic on the BBQ. Try arugula on a mushroom pizza or as a salad with a lemon and olive oil vinaigrette. Try broccoli rabe sauteed or roasted with olive oil, balsamic vinegar and topped with toasted nuts.

### Here is a yummy mediterranean pasta dish to try:

Barilla PLUS Rotini with Fresh Tomatoes, Aromatic Herb Pesto & Ricotta Salata  
Source: [www.barillaplus.ca](http://www.barillaplus.ca)

Prep Time: 10 minutes  
Cook Time: 15 minutes

### Ingredients

- 1 Pkg BARILLA PLUS Rotini
- 8 tablespoons (100 ml) extra virgin olive oil
- 4 plum tomatoes, diced
- 1 clove garlic
- 3 sprigs marjoram
- 3 sprigs oregano
- 6 leaves basil
- 1 tablespoon (25 leaves) parsley
- 3 sprigs thyme
- ½ cup (60 grams) walnuts
- To taste salt
- To taste black pepper
- ½ cup (60 grams) ricotta Salata, shredded

### Preparation

BRING a large pot of water to a boil. In a large skillet, SAUTÉ tomatoes in 1 tablespoon olive oil. COOK pasta according to package directions. While pasta is cooking, COMBINE all dry ingredients in blender. PULSE for 10 seconds or until finely chopped.

DRIZZLE in olive oil slowly to create the pesto. PLACE pesto in bowl and add ½ cup pasta cooking liquid. DRAIN pasta and toss with pesto and tomatoes. TOP with shredded cheese.

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## Where can I find out more information on pasta, the Mediterranean diet and recipe ideas?

For additional recipes, please visit [www.barilla.ca](http://www.barilla.ca) and on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/barillacanada](http://www.facebook.com/barillacanada).

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*Andrea Holwegner, known as the Chocoholic Dietitian, is founder and president of Health Stand Nutrition Consulting Inc., a member of the Canadian Association of Professional Speakers and a media expert for the Dietitians of Canada. For nutrition counselling information and to sign up for a free monthly newsletter loaded with nutrition tips, recipes and more visit [www.healthstandnutrition.com](http://www.healthstandnutrition.com). Twitter @chocoholicRD.*

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