

Food as Medicine

What the evidence actually says about which foods change your risk — plus DASH and Mediterranean targets and a sample day of each.

Key takeaways: what one daily serving is associated with

Food	Change in all-cause mortality	Also worth knowing
Nuts and seeds	About 24% lower	Largest per-serving benefit of any food. About 27% lower cardiovascular mortality.
Whole grains	About 8% lower	About 13% lower cardiovascular mortality.
Fish and seafood	About 7% lower	Long-chain omega-3s; lower triglycerides and arrhythmia risk.
Whole fruit	About 6% lower	Whole fruit, not juice. Lower coronary disease and stroke.
Vegetables	About 4% lower	Fruit and vegetables together: about 28% lower cardiovascular mortality.
Legumes	Smaller, less certain	Plant protein in place of animal protein tracks with lower mortality.
Unprocessed red meat	About 10% higher	Also higher diabetes risk.
Processed meat	About 23% higher	Bacon, deli meat, hot dogs, sausage. No established safe intake.

The aggregate number: optimal intake across the protective foods has been associated with up to a **56% reduction in all-cause mortality**, while high intake of the harmful ones roughly doubles it. The pattern is what moves the needle — not any single food.

Eat these / Limit these

EAT	LIMIT OR AVOID
Daily: nuts and seeds, vegetables (aim near 400 g), whole fruit (near 300 g), whole grains, legumes.	Limit: refined grains, added sugars and sugar-sweetened drinks, unprocessed red meat.
Regularly: fish and seafood, extra-virgin olive oil and other liquid plant oils, low-fat dairy and yogurt.	Minimize: processed meats, ultra-processed foods, excess sodium (target about 2,000 mg/day), trans fats.

The food beats the pill

In a meta-analysis of 46 randomized trials, **whole** polyphenol-rich foods lowered blood pressure (systolic about 3.7 mmHg, diastolic about 1.4) while **purified extracts** did not. Berries, cocoa, and tea produce the most consistent improvements in blood-vessel function, and each 1% improvement in that measure corresponds to roughly 13% lower cardiovascular risk. About two cups of unsweetened tea a day lands in the useful range. Milk and sugar blunt the effect — how you drink it matters.

DASH & Mediterranean Eating Plans

Daily serving targets and a sample day for each.

DASH pattern

Ranked by the 2025 AHA/ACC hypertension guideline as the single most effective lifestyle intervention for lowering blood pressure.

Food group	Target
Grains, mostly whole	6–8 servings a day
Vegetables	4–5 servings a day
Fruit	4–5 servings a day
Fat-free or low-fat dairy	2–3 servings a day
Lean meat, poultry, fish	6 oz a day or less
Nuts, seeds, legumes	4–5 servings a week
Fats and oils	2–3 servings a day
Sweets and added sugars	5 servings a week or less
Sodium	2,300 mg a day; largest benefit at 1,500 mg

A DASH day. Breakfast: oatmeal with banana and unsalted almonds, cup of low-fat milk. **Lunch:** whole-grain wrap with grilled chicken, spinach, tomato, low-fat cheese; baby carrots; a pear. **Snack:** low-fat yogurt with fruit and unsalted seeds. **Dinner:** baked white fish or skinless poultry, brown rice, steamed broccoli, large green salad with oil-based dressing. **Seasoning:** herbs, spices, citrus, and no-salt-added canned or frozen produce instead of salt.

Mediterranean pattern — targets

Strongest hard-outcome trial evidence of any diet: PREDIMED reduced major cardiovascular events by roughly 30%.

Food	Target
Extra-virgin olive oil	4 tablespoons a day or more — main cooking and dressing fat
Vegetables	2 servings a day or more
Fruit	3 servings a day or more
Whole grains	Daily
Nuts	3 servings a week or more (about 30 g each)
Legumes	3 servings a week or more
Fish and seafood	3 servings a week or more, favoring fatty fish
Poultry vs. red meat	White meat preferred
Red and processed meat	Minimize
Butter, cream, margarine	Less than 1 serving a day
Sugary drinks, commercial pastries	Minimize

A Mediterranean day. Breakfast: Greek yogurt with berries and walnuts, whole-grain toast with olive oil. **Lunch:** large salad of greens, tomato, cucumber, chickpeas with olive oil and lemon; whole-grain pita; an orange. **Snack:** a handful of almonds and walnuts with an apple. **Dinner:** grilled salmon or sardines, roasted zucchini, peppers and eggplant in olive oil, farro or brown rice.

On wine: moderate red wine with meals was part of the traditional pattern and the trial protocols. I will not tell anyone to start drinking for their heart. If you do not drink, this pattern works for you without it.

Which one should you pick?

Both rest on the same plant-forward base. DASH leans on low-fat dairy and strict sodium control — the better first move if blood pressure is the main problem. The Mediterranean pattern leans on olive oil and fatty fish and has the stronger hard-outcome record. Pick the one you will still be eating in a year. Adherence beats theoretical superiority every time.

***The honest caveat.** Nearly all of these numbers come from observational studies, and the randomized trials with hard endpoints are for whole patterns, not single foods. Change the pattern, then check your labs.*