

**EXTENSION****FCS-3201**

Firefighters at risk: How healthy eating can be a lifesaver

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Did you know that firefighters, who bravely face tough challenges and save lives every day, are also at a higher risk for serious health issues?

Introduction

Their exposure to smoke, chemicals, high heat and stressful situations increases their risk of heart disease and cancer (Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, 2024). In fact, heart-related deaths account for about half of all on-duty firefighter fatalities, making heart disease the leading cause of death while on the job (Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, 2024). Good nutrition is key to preventing these conditions, yet their work environment often lacks quick, healthy and affordable food options. This leads to food choices high in calories, saturated fat and salt, contributing to weight gain and increasing risk of heart disease (Frattaroli et al., 2013). Less healthy eating habits can also lower good cholesterol (HDL), which helps remove bad cholesterol (LDL) from the body. Too much bad cholesterol can cause a sticky substance called plaque to build up in your arteries, making it harder for blood to flow. This increases the risk of heart disease and stroke. That's why having higher levels of good cholesterol and lower levels of bad cholesterol is key to maintaining a healthy heart (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024).

What is a Mediterranean diet?

The Mediterranean diet is a way of eating that emphasizes:

- Foods to eat daily: fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes, nuts and olive oil.
- Foods to eat twice a week: fish and seafood.
- Foods to eat in moderation, a few times per week: poultry, eggs and dairy.
- Foods to limit to a few times per month: red and processed meats.

How can it help?

The Mediterranean diet helps prevent heart disease and cancer, and many firefighters find it easy to follow (Yang et al., 2015). A study showed 75% of firefighters wanted to eat healthier. The Mediterranean diet was the most appealing option due to its variety and health benefits. This diet can improve firefighters' health, enhance job performance and reduce the risk of serious diseases, including heart disease.

What does research show?

- The Mediterranean diet improves heart health by increasing good cholesterol and lowering bad cholesterol in firefighters (Hershey et al., 2023; Lan et al., 2020; Romanidou et al., 2020).
- Studies consistently show that firefighters who follow this diet have better cholesterol levels compared to those on a typical American diet (Christodoulou et al., 2022).
- Combining the Mediterranean diet with physical activity leads to greater heart health benefits (Almeida et al., 2022).

How can firefighters use the Mediterranean diet?

1. **Use olive oil:** Swap butter for olive oil in cooking and dressings.
2. **Stay hydrated:** Drink water instead of sugary drinks.
3. **Choose lean proteins:** Go for chicken, turkey and fish while cutting back on red meat.
4. **Pick whole grains:** Choose whole grains over refined grains at least half the time.
5. **Keep healthy snacks on hand:** Stock up on quick, healthy snacks for your shifts, such as fresh fruit, fruit cups in 100% juice, low-fat yogurt, cheese sticks, whole-grain.
6. **Plan balanced meals:** Fill half your plate with fruits and veggies, a quarter with whole grains and a quarter with lean proteins.
7. **Check out recipes:** Use the search terms “Mediterranean diet recipes.”
8. **Create a supportive environment:** Place a MyPlate or Harvard Healthy Eating Plate poster in the kitchen as a visual reminder and create accountability groups within each shift to support healthier eating habits for lasting change.

Who else can benefit from the Mediterranean diet?

While this fact sheet focuses on firefighters, people in other high-stress or physically demanding professions—such as farmers and other first responders—also have increased risk for heart disease and may benefit from following a Mediterranean-style eating pattern.

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