Adapting the Mediterranean Diet for West African Cuisines

Maintaining a healthy diet is crucial for managing Parkinson's disease (PD) and supporting overall health. This Mediterranean-style eating plan, adapted with West African foods, can support brain health and manage risks like high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, and stroke. Here's how to enjoy the benefits of the Mediterranean diet while celebrating West African flavours and ingredients.

Focus on Healthy Fats

What to Eat: Use olive oil or avocado oil where possible, as these are healthier alternatives to fats like coconut oil and palm oil, which are high in saturated fats. Avocados, also rich in healthy fats, can replace oil in some dishes.

Tip: For dishes like egusi soup or okra stew, use a mix of olive oil and a smaller portion of palm oil to retain flavour while reducing saturated fat.

Choose Whole Grains and Starchy Tubers

What to Eat: Replace refined grains with whole grains like fonio, millet, amaranth, sorghum, brown rice, and teff. Starchy tubers, such as cassava, yucca, yams, sweet potatoes, and plantains, are also high in fibre.

Examples: Boil, bake, or roast yams and plantains instead of frying. Try preparing fonio or millet with vegetables for a hearty, fibre-rich dish.



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Emphasise Plant-Based Proteins

What to Eat: West African diets are rich in plant-based proteins like black-eyed peas, cowpeas, kidney beans, and groundnuts (peanuts), which are excellent sources of fibre in the Mediterranean diet.

Tip: Add legumes to stews or soups for extra protein, or make moin-moin (bean pudding) with less oil for a nutrient-packed meal.

Eat Plenty of Vegetables

What to Eat: West African dishes include lots of nutritious vegetables like okra, spinach, squashes, tomatoes, green beans, and callaloo. Aim for at least 1 portion of leafy green vegetables and 3 portions of other vegetables daily.

Tip: Add vegetables to dishes like jollof rice and soups, and steam or grill vegetables to retain nutrients. Try leafy greens like collard greens, beet greens, chard or watercress for a nutrient boost.

Include Fresh Fruits

What to Eat: Fresh tropical fruits like mango, papaya, guava, pineapple, and plantains are packed with vitamins, fibre, and antioxidants. These fruits can be a part of your snacks or desserts.

Tip: Have fruit as a snack or make a fruit salad with lime for added flavour. For traditional drinks like bissap (hibiscus tea), prepare with minimal sugar or try unsweetened fruit-infused water.



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Include Fish and Lean Proteins

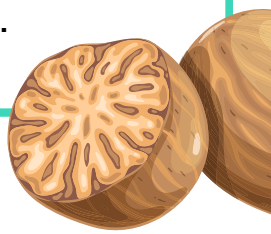
What to Eat: Fish like mackerel, trout and sardines are rich in omega-3 fatty acids, which are important for brain health and reducing inflammation. Lean proteins like chicken and turkey should also be included in moderation.

Tip: Grill, bake, or steam fish and chicken instead of frying them. Flavour them with herbs like ginger, garlic, and cumin for an antioxidant boost.

Use Herbs and Spices for Flavour

What to Eat: Herbs and spices like cayenne, ginger, garlic, coriander, oregano, cinnamon and nutmeg add flavour without the need for extra salt.

Tip: Use these herbs generously, but limit high-sodium seasonings like stock cubes. Instead, flavour soups and stews with fresh herbs and spices.



Reduce Processed and Fried Foods

What to Eat Less Often: Reduce how often you eat fried foods like fried plantains, akara, puff-puff, and processed meats. Processed meats and “ultra-processed” snacks, should be eaten less frequently.

Tip: Use healthier cooking methods such as baking, grilling, or air-frying. For example, replace fried plantains with baked or grilled plantains, and opt for whole grains over refined flour.



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Manage Salt and Sugar Intake

What to Avoid: Excess salt can lead to high blood pressure, which is prevalent in West African communities. Limit seasoning cubes and salty ingredients.

Tip: Use lime or vinegar for tangy flavour and reduce the need for salt. Prepare drinks like zobo (hibiscus tea) with minimal or no sugar to enjoy a traditional beverage without added calories.

Stay Hydrated

What to Drink: Stay hydrated with water, coconut water, or herbal teas like bissap. Limit sugary drinks and alcohol.

Tip: Instead of sugary drinks, try fruit-infused water such as fresh lime water or opt for unsweetened herbal teas.



Consider Supplements if Needed

What to Watch for: If you follow a largely plant-based diet, you may benefit from additional nutrients like vitamin B12, omega-3, and iron.

Tip: Incorporate fortified plant-based milks or chia seeds for omega-3, and consult with your healthcare provider about taking vitamin B12, iron or omega-3 supplements if necessary.

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Practical Meal Ideas

- **Breakfast:** Oats with milk and a handful of groundnuts, or moin-moin with boiled plantains.
- **Lunch:** Brown rice and beans with grilled chicken and a side of stewed spinach or okra.
- **Snack:** Fresh fruit like guava or mango, or baked plantains.
- **Dinner:** Grilled fish like sardines or mackerel, with a side of boiled yams and vegetable stew.
- **Dessert:** Fresh fruit salad or baked sweet potatoes with a sprinkle of cinnamon.

Adapting the Mediterranean diet to a West African eating style can help manage Parkinson's disease while maintaining the cultural flavours and dishes you enjoy. Focus on including whole grains, lean proteins, plenty of vegetables, fruits, and healthy fats while reducing salty, fried and processed foods.

Making these small, sustainable changes can have a significant impact on your health and well-being.

If you have specific dietary concerns, talk to your dietitian to ensure your meals meet your nutritional needs while managing Parkinson's disease.

