

American Diet Boosts Stroke Risk Eat More Fruit and Vegetables, Less Meat and Processed Foods

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July 1, 2004 -- The diet usually recommended to reduce the risk of the nation's two leading causes of death -- heart disease and cancer -- is now linked to a lower risk of the third -- stroke.

Once again, researchers say the best edible insurance for reducing the risk of strokes -- which strikes an American every 45 seconds and kills one every three minutes -- is to eat more fruit, vegetables, and other high-fiber fare, and less of what most folks usually eat.

After tracking nearly 72,000 women for 14 years, researchers found that women who ate the most fruits, vegetables, fish, and whole grains were less likely to have a stroke than those who ate less of this healthy fare.

The less-healthy diet was more typical of the American way of eating -- more red and processed meats, refined grains, and sweets.

While these findings may seem obvious, there is a new twist. Past studies have investigated a possible link to stroke with individual foods and nutrients. "But this is the first study to examine how overall dietary habits impact stroke," says lead researcher Teresa Fung, ScD, a nutritionist at Simmons College of Health Studies in Boston and at Harvard School of Public Health. "Its importance is in pointing people to a general direction in their diet."

Familiar Advice

Of course, it's a direction you've heard before.

"Eat a plant-based diet that contains at least five servings of fruits and vegetables a day and goes up to include as many vegetables as you can handle," says Fung.

"That doesn't necessarily mean eating vegetarian -- you can have fish and chicken," she tells WebMD. "But you should eat as unrefined as possible, having healthy foods in their whole state. Even if you look beyond stroke, this kind of prudent diet significantly lowers risk of cardiovascular disease, colon cancer, and other conditions."

In her study, none of the participants -- between ages 38 and 63 -- had known heart disease or diabetes when the research began in 1984. The study is published in this week's rapid access issue of *Stroke*.

Every two to four years, they provided information about their diet, lifestyle habits, and overall health. The women were assigned a ranking based on the lowest to highest amounts of foods they ate in a category of either a produce-rich "prudent" diet or the fattier "Western" diet.

By the end of the study in 1998, Fung found that women who ate the highest amounts of red and processed meats, refined grains, and sweets had a 58% higher risk of stroke compared with those who ate the lowest amounts.

In the "prudent" diet plan, those who ate the most fruits and vegetables were 22% less likely to have a stroke than those who ate less produce.

Lessons Already Learned

These findings back previous studies that looked at how individual types of food affect stroke -- with similar results.

Last month, some of the same researchers working with Fung found a 40% lower risk of ischemic stroke -- the most common type that's caused by a blood clot that impairs blood flow to the brain -- among men who ate the most fruits and vegetables compared with those eating the least. Researchers speculate it's due to the effects of a particular group of antioxidant vitamins, noting that those with the lower stroke risk ate foods with the most vitamins A and E, beta carotene, lycopene, lutein, and other beneficial nutrients.

These nutrients are in vegetables such as squash, carrots, pumpkin, kale, and spinach. Interestingly, that study follows one from last September on some 40,000 Japanese men and women tracked for 18 years that indicates the risk of death from stroke was 26% lower in those who ate yellow or green vegetables each day than those who ate them weekly.

Meanwhile, processed foods might increase stroke risk because they are often high in fats and salt. Some experts suggest that up to 75% of "hidden" salt might come from canned foods and other overly processed fare like deli meats.

"The role of saturated fats as it pertains to stroke is still under investigation, but saturated fats could play some role," Fung tells WebMD. "In essence, an ischemic stroke is much like a heart attack that occurs in your brain, and can result from atherosclerosis."

SOURCES: Fung, T, *Stroke: Journal of the American Heart Association*, July 2, 2004, rapid access issue. Teresa Fung, ScD, assistant professor of nutrition, Simmons College School for Health Studies, Boston; adjunct assistant professor of nutrition, Harvard School of Public Health, Boston. Hak, A. *Stroke: Journal of the American Heart Association*, June 4, 2004; vol 35. Sauvaget, C. *Stroke: Journal of the American Heart Association*, Sept. 19, 2003; rapid access issue.

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