

Diet: The Mediterranean Diet and Alzheimer's Disease

Eating a Mediterranean diet is known to provide a number of health benefits. Researchers have shown that it can be linked to a reduction in the risk of developing cardiovascular disease and certain types of cancer, as well as reducing overall mortality. One of the most recent research studies has looked specifically at the question of whether such a diet can indeed help to lower the risk of developing Alzheimer's Disease (AD).

If such a diet can lead to the lessening of the risk of developing AD, being able to advise people accordingly may help in the fight against one of the serious issues facing societies with increasingly elderly populations. AD is the most common form of dementia and as the demographics of societies change so the number of people with dementia is steadily on the increase. Dementia affects one person in twenty over the age of 65 and one person in five over the age of 80. Nearly 18 million people worldwide suffer from dementia with AD making up 55 per cent of all cases.

In the recent study, researchers from the Columbia University Medical Center looked at the diet and health of 2,258 people over a four year period. The participants, who came from New York, were all community based and nondemented at the beginning of the study period. They were prospectively evaluated every one and a half years. During the course of the study 262 of the participants developed AD.

The researchers gave the participants' diets a "Mediterranean Diet score" of between zero and nine. They found that, for each additional point on the Mediterranean diet scale, the risk of Alzheimer's dropped by almost 10%. The participants were also split into three groups according to their diet scores. Compared to the third of people who scored worst on the Mediterranean diet scores, those in the mid-ranking group had a 15% to 21% lower risk of developing Alzheimer's disease, and

those with the highest score had a 39% to 40% lower risk. The researchers found that the association between diet and risk of developing AD remained significant even after adjustments were made for age, gender, ethnicity, education, caloric intake, weight, smoking and other conditions.

So just what constitutes a Mediterranean diet? There are a number of key elements:-

- High intake of vegetables, fruits and cereals
- Moderate to high intake of fish
- Low intake of saturated fats
- High intake of unsaturated fats, such as olive oil
- Low intake of dairy products and meat
- Modest intake of alcohol, mostly wine

Although the research could perhaps be criticised for relying heavily on peoples' memories of what they had eaten (even though an accepted dietary assessment technique had been used) the findings are significant. As Professor Clive Ballard, director of research at the UK's Alzheimer's Society, said: "(This study) makes an important contribution by suggesting that a strong adherence to a healthy diet can reduce the risk of developing Alzheimer's disease by as much as 40%, emphasising the importance of healthy eating."

References:-

Scarmeas N, Stern Y, Tang M, Mayeux R, Luchsinger J
Mediterranean Diet and risk for Alzheimer's disease
Annals of Neurology epub 18th April 2006 in advance of print

Alzheimer's Society www.alzheimers.org.uk
BBC Health 17th April 2006