Think About It! Healthy Eating Supports Cognitive Health

Sticking to an anti-inflammatory diet rich in fruits, veggies, fish, and tea or coffee may help keep dementia at bay.

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It's well known that healthy foods provide the body with various nutrients that help stave off disease. Now study findings published in the journal Neurology show that people who stick to an anti-inflammatory diet may also reduce their risk of dementia later in life, reports the American Academy of Neurology in a press release.

Anti-inflammatory diets, such as the Mediterranean Diet, consist largely of fruits, vegetables, beans, tea or coffee, fish, nuts and seeds, whole grains and olive oil. Research shows that these foods may help control inflammation. When triggered by injury or infection, inflammation may have protective properties, but when inflammation persists uncontrolled, it can lead to painful chronic illnesses, such as arthritis, diabetes and other chronic illnesses.

For the study, researchers assessed 1,059 people without dementia living in Greece. Their average age was 73. Scientists instructed these participants to respond to a food frequency questionnaire to collect data on how inflammatory their diets were. Participants were asked how many foods they consumed from different food groups during the previous month. The categories included dairy products, cereals, fruits, vegetables, meat, fish, legumes—including beans, lentils and peas—added fats, alcoholic beverages, stimulants and sweets.

Eating regimens were categorized as anti-inflammatory if people ate, on average, 20 servings of fruit, 19 servings of veggies, 11 cups of coffee or tea and four servings of beans or legumes per week. Individuals with more inflammatory diets consumed, on average, nine servings of fruit, 10 servings of vegetables, nine of coffee or tea and two servings of legumes per week.

Scores for inflammatory diets ranged from -8.87 to 7.98, with elevated numbers reflecting a highly inflammatory diet.

Next, researchers separated participants into three equal groups of people with low, medium and high dietary inflammatory scores and tracked them for three years on average. After adjusting for age, sex and education, researchers noted that compared to the lowest third of individuals who consumed the least inflammatory diet, those in the top third of people who followed a high

inflammation diet were three times more likely to develop dementia.

During the investigation 62, or 6%, of participants developed dementia. Scientists noted that those who developed dementia had average scores of -0.06, compared with average scores of -0.70 for those who did not develop dementia.

“Our results are getting us closer to characterizing and measuring the inflammatory potential of people’s diets,” said Nikolaos Scarmeas, MD, PhD, of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, a fellow of the American Academy of Neurology and one of the study’s authors. “That in turn could help inform more tailored and precise dietary recommendations and other strategies to maintain cognitive health.”

Furthermore, Scarmeas advised, “There may be some potent nutritional tools in your home to help fight the inflammation that could contribute to brain aging. Diet is a lifestyle factor you can modify, and it might play a role in combating inflammation, one of the biological pathways contributing to risk for dementia and cognitive impairment later in life.”

To learn more about inflammation-fighting foods, read “5 Foods That Fight Inflammation.”

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