

Mediterranean diet during midlife tied to lower odds of impairments later on in women

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(dailyRx News) The benefits of eating well are both immediate and long-term. And that doesn't seem to change for women as they age, as eating well during midlife could be rewarding farther down the road.

A new study found that women who consumed a Mediterranean or similar diet during middle age had lower odds of developing any chronic illnesses and physical and cognitive impairments than women who did not eat such a diet during midlife.

The Mediterranean diet emphasizes plant foods, whole grains and fish with limited alcohol and less red and processed meats.

Women who consumed these kinds of diets aged more healthily than others, according to this study.

Cecilia Samieri, PhD, from Université Bordeaux in France, led a group of researchers in investigating dietary patterns of women and how they were linked to healthy aging.

The study included data from 10,670 women who were in their late 50s and early 60s between 1984 and 1986.

The women participated in the Nurses' Health Study, did not have any major chronic diseases at the time and were able to provide information on their health about 15 years later on average.

During the 80s, the women had taken a couple of questionnaires on their food consumption and frequency. Their food intake was

converted into nutrient intake.

The questionnaires, including the Alternative Healthy Eating Index (AHEI-2010) and the Alternate Mediterranean Diet questionnaire, defined the participants' diet quality during their mid-life years.

The Alternate Mediterranean Diet has nine components: vegetables, fruits, nuts, whole grains, legumes, fish, moderate alcohol, red or processed meats and fatty acids.

With the AHEI diet, the focus is on greater intakes of vegetables, fruits, whole grains, nuts and vegetable proteins, and smaller intakes of sugar-sweetened beverages, red meats, trans fats and sodium.

The researchers tracked the women's level of healthy aging, as defined by the development of four different components: 11 major chronic diseases, physical impairments, mental impairments and cognitive impairments.

Women were considered healthy agers if they did not develop any of the 11 major chronic disease or mental, physical and cognitive impairments. Those who did develop some impairment were considered usual agers.

The researchers found that the odds of aging healthily versus usual aging were 34 percent greater in women who greatly adhered to the AHEI-2010 guidelines during their midlife years compared to women who did not follow those guidelines.

The odds of aging healthily versus aging usually were 46 percent higher among women who followed the Alternate Mediterranean diet the most than among those who followed the diet plan least.

When looking at each of the four components separately, the researchers found that both diet plans were significantly tied to a

greater likelihood of having no major limitations in mental health and physical functioning.

“These data may have an especially important role in promoting a healthy diet—maintaining physical, cognitive and mental health with aging may provide a more powerful incentive for dietary change than simply prolonging life or avoiding any single chronic disease,” the researchers wrote in their report.

According to Deborah Gordon, MD, a family physician and dailyRx Contributing Expert not affiliated with the study, the findings are a valuable confirmation of the worth of learning to love healthy food.

“Not surprisingly, both of these dietary plans offered a great benefit in terms of overall health outcome, compared to its sorry alternative, the standard American Diet,” Dr. Gordon told dailyRx News. “Comparison between the two diets merits a careful read, as the Mediterranean eaters fared considerably better than the Alternative eaters.”

Dr. Gordon suggested staying away from processed foods and choose meat, fish and nuts complemented with full-fat dairy and avocado and “generous, consistent consumption of fruits and vegetables.”

The authors noted they could not exclude patients with impaired physical function, cognition and mental health at midlife.

The authors also could not determine the risks for patients who transitioned from healthy to usual aging since they stopped following patients when they turned 70 years of age.

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