

An Apple (or Orange) a Day

Can eating more fruits and vegetables in your golden years protect your memory? Are you at higher risk of developing Alzheimer's disease if you have diabetes? Will use of cholesterol-reducing statin drugs protect you from cognitive decline? Investigators from the Cache County Study on Memory, Health and Aging, based at Utah State University, presented research findings on these topics and more at the Alzheimer's Association International Conference on Prevention of Dementia held June 18-21 in Washington, D.C.

One of the largest studies of its kind, the Cache County Study on Memory, Health and Aging is a collaborative effort between researchers at Utah State, Duke University, Johns Hopkins University and the University of Washington. Started in 1995, the study has followed a large group of Cache County senior citizens, investigating a wide range of health, lifestyle and environmental factors that may influence aging and memory.

USU researcher Heidi Wengreen, a lead investigator on a study of the relation between fruit and vegetable consumption and cognitive function in the elderly, was among the presenters at the conference, the first of its kind specifically geared to dementia prevention. Wengreen's research involved analysis of data collected from more than 5,000 Cache County seniors, each of whom completed a standardized memory test up to four times over an eight-year period and answered detailed questions about personal dietary habits.

"We found that the group with the highest intake of fruits and vegetables scored better on the memory test than the group with the lowest intake," said Wengreen. "It appears that higher intake of fruits and vegetables may protect against memory loss in older adults."

Other Cache County Study findings reported at the conference, which drew about 1,000 attendees, revealed that men with diabetes may be at increased risk of developing Alzheimer's disease but not women diabetics, the combined use of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs and antioxidant supplements can prevent cognitive decline, and use of statin drugs does not influence cognitive performance.

Study project manager Nancy Sassano of USU's Center for Epidemiologic Studies said the continued participation of such a large number of Cache County residents has allowed the project to make significant contributions to scientific knowledge about Alzheimer's disease, memory and aging. Findings have been published in more than 30 professional journals and presented at numerous national and international conferences. "Our study participants really deserve a lot of thanks," she said.