

Early Start to Heart Disease? Veggies May Be the Cure

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While heart disease almost always strikes in middle or old age, Americans are starting down the road very young — as children and young adults, several studies released Friday show. But prevention might be as easy as eating more fruits and veggies.

One study showed that nearly a third of kids screened at pediatric clinics in Houston already had unhealthy cholesterol levels by age 9 to 11. Another team found young women who reported eating the most fruits and vegetables in their 20s were 40 percent less likely to have dangerously blocked arteries in their 40s.

Taken together, they show that while heart disease starts early, good eating habits early in life might be able to prevent it.

Dr. Thomas Seery, a pediatric cardiologist at Texas Children's Hospital in Houston and colleagues looked at the records of nearly 13,000 children getting routine physicals at the hospital's clinics.



MICHAEL STRAVATO / AP FILE

Preventing heart disease may be as easy as eating more vegetables. To their surprise, about a third of the 9- to 11-year-olds already had unhealthy cholesterol levels, putting them firmly on the road to developing heart disease as adults. A third were also obese, Seery told a meeting of the American College of Cardiology in Washington.

This lends support to recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics that all kids aged 9 to 11 get cholesterol screening.

“Kids need to have their cholesterol panel checked at some point during this timeframe,” Seery said. “In doing so, it presents the perfect opportunity for clinicians and parents to discuss the importance of healthy lifestyle choices on cardiovascular health.”

Other studies bear this out. Ultrasound examinations of [children as young as 10](#) have shown they can have arteries that are already as clogged as some middle-aged peoples'.

Pediatricians say kids this age are usually too young to take cholesterol-lowering medications -- although some kids with [very high cholesterol](#) should. Instead, they and their parents would be advised on diet and exercise. Eating more fruits and vegetables and eating less fat and sugar can lower cholesterol, and adding exercise helps too. And doctors say getting kids started young with healthy habits can help them through life.

A second study drives that point home.

Dr. Michael Miedema of the Minneapolis Heart Institute and colleagues found that women who ate the most fruit and vegetables

while in their late teens and early 20s were 40 percent less likely to have dangerous blockages in their arteries 20 years later.

They looked at 2,648 people taking part in a lifetime study of heart health, starting in 1985 when they were aged 18 to 30.

As part of the study, they filled out detailed questionnaire on diet. And in 2005 or 2006 they had scans for evidence of blockages in their heart arteries.

"One of the things we should focus on is improving fruit and vegetable intake in our youth."

The women with the healthiest top-third of diets reported eating about 8-9 servings of fruits and vegetables a day. They were a little bit less likely to smoke and to eat unhealthy junk food. Twenty years later, these same women were 40 percent less likely to have any plaque in their arteries than women in the lowest third of fruit and vegetable intake, Miedema said.

But this effect held no matter what else the women consumed — red meat, fish, or even sugary sodas. It also didn't matter if the women had changed their eating habits later in life. "Basically, the relationship held true even when you added those things in," Miedema told reporters.

They didn't see the same effect for the men and don't know why not. It might be there weren't enough men in the study — more than half

the participants are women.

“The results of our study shouldn't be used to say fruit and vegetable intake isn't important in men,” Miedema told NBC News. “I think there are several other studies to suggest that it is. Potentially we can use it to say that fruit and vegetable intake may not be as protective in men as it is in women.”

Other studies show clearly that people who eat more fruits and vegetables have a lower risk of not only heart disease, but of many types of cancer, and they have a lower overall risk of dying early from any cause.

One big study last year found that a Mediterranean diet rich in fruits, vegetables, olive oil and a little wine can [cut the risk of heart attacks](#) and strokes by 30 percent, in men as well as women.

“These findings confirm the concept that plaque development is a lifelong process, and that process can be slowed down with a healthy diet at a young age,” Miedema said. “This is often when dietary habits are established, so there is value in knowing how the choices we make in early life have lifelong benefits.”

The federal government advises that [half your food intake](#) should be fruits and vegetables and now advocates a diet based on plant food.

“This kind of provides more credence to the idea that one of the things we should focus on is improving fruit and vegetable intake in our youth,” Miedema said.

Erika Edwards contributed to this story