

Veggie-Rich Diets May Mean Lower Heart Risks

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By: Amy Norton

People who eat more plant foods than animal products may lower their risk of dying from heart disease or a stroke, a new large study suggests.

Researchers found that among more than 450,000 European adults, **those whose diets were about 70 percent plant-based -- meaning whole grains, beans, vegetables, fruit and nuts -- had a relatively lower risk of dying from heart disease. Their odds were 20 percent lower**, compared with people whose diets were over 50 percent meat, dairy, eggs and fish.



The findings do not prove that plant foods deserve the credit, said lead researcher Camille Lassale, an epidemiologist at Imperial College London, in England. She said her team accounted for some other potential explanations, such as people's weight, exercise habits and education levels. But it's still difficult to pinpoint these "semi-vegetarian" diets as the reason for the lower rates of heart disease and stroke deaths.

That said, the findings are in line with a wealth of research, said Lassale, who is scheduled to present the results Thursday at an American Heart Association (AHA)



meeting in Baltimore. Research presented at medical meetings should be viewed as preliminary until published in a peer-reviewed medical journal.

The AHA recommends that people should eat plenty of plant foods, but limit red meat and saturated fat, which is largely found in animal products.

Plus, Lassale said, the heart benefits of the so-called Mediterranean diet are well-established. That diet includes plenty of plant-based foods and little meat or dairy. "This isn't revolutionary," Lassale said of the findings. "It's a simple message: Replace some meat, eggs and dairy with beans, nuts, [grains] and vegetables."

However, fish -- a staple of the Mediterranean diet -- is a different matter, according to Lassale. She noted that oily varieties of fish contain heart-healthy omega-3 fats, and are also a good substitute for red meat.

The findings are based on over 450,000 adults aged 35 to 70 who took part in a European study on nutrition and cancer risk. At the outset, they gave detailed information on their diets and lifestyle. Over the next 13 years, slightly more than 5,000 died of heart disease or stroke.

Lassale's team looked at the study participants' diet information and gave each person a score based on how "pro-vegetarian" their eating pattern was. They found that people with a "high" score were 20 percent less likely to die of heart-related causes than those with the lowest scores.

The good news, according to Lassale, is that people who have no interest in becoming vegetarian can still manage a more pro-vegetarian style of eating.

Simply looking at your dinner plate and making sure it has more plant foods than meat and dairy is a big step, she said.



Rachel Johnson, a professor of nutrition and medicine at the University of Vermont, agreed. "The results are important because they demonstrate that people do not need to follow a total vegetarian diet to lower their risk for cardiovascular disease," she said. "Moving toward a more plant-based diet appears to be beneficial without going completely vegetarian."

Johnson, who is also a past chair of the AHA's nutrition committee, stressed that **fish fits into that picture**. "The AHA recommends eating fish at least twice a week -- especially fish that contain omega-3 fatty acids," she said.

Some good sources include salmon, trout and herring, Johnson said.

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