Trends in

Medical Research

Eating Healthier Means Living Longer

The leading causes of death have shifted from infectious diseases to chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease and cancer. These illnesses may be affected by diet. In a study published in the January 2011 issue of the Journal of the American Dietetic Association, researchers investigated empirical data regarding the associations of dietary patterns with mortality through analysis of the eating patterns of over 2500 adults between the ages of 70 and 79 over a ten-year period. They found that diets favoring certain foods were associated with reduced mortality.

By 2030, an estimated 973 million adults will be aged 65 or older worldwide. The objective of this study was to determine the dietary patterns of a large and diverse group of older adults, and to explore associations of these dietary patterns with survival over a 10-year period. A secondary goal was to evaluate participants' quality of life and nutritional status according to their dietary patterns.

By determining the consumption frequency of 108 different food items, researchers were able to group the participants into six different clusters according to predominant food choices:

* "Healthy foods" (374 participants)
* "High-fat dairy products" (332)
* "Meat, fried foods, and alcohol" (693)
* "Breakfast cereal" (386)
* "Refined grains" (458)
* "Sweets and desserts" (339)

The "Healthy foods" cluster was characterized by relatively higher intake of low-fat dairy products, fruit, whole grains, poultry, fish, and vegetables, and lower consumption of meat, fried foods, sweets, high-calorie drinks, and added fat. The "High fat dairy products" cluster had higher intake of foods such as ice cream, cheese, and 2% and whole milk and yogurt, and lower intake of poultry, low-fat dairy products, rice, and pasta.

The study was unique in that it evaluated participants' quality of life and nutritional status, through detailed biochemical measures, according to their dietary patterns. After controlling for gender, age, race, clinical site, education, physical activity, smoking, and total calorie intake, the "High-fat dairy products" cluster had a 40% higher risk of mortality than the "Healthy foods" cluster. The "Sweets and desserts" cluster had a 37% higher risk. No significant differences in risk of mortality were seen between the "Healthy foods" cluster and the "Breakfast cereal" or "Refined grains" clusters.

According to Lead Author Amy L. Anderson, Ph.D., Department of Nutrition and Food Science, University of Maryland, the "results of this study suggest that older adults who follow a dietary pattern consistent with current guidelines to consume relatively high amounts of vegetables, fruit, whole grains, low-fat dairy products, poultry and fish, may have a lower risk of mortality. Because a substantial percentage of older adults in this study followed the 'Healthy foods' dietary pattern, adherence to such a diet appears a feasible and realistic recommendation for potentially improved survival and quality of life in the growing older adult population."