

Mediterranean diet associated with lower risk of cognitive impairment

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Eating a Mediterranean diet appears to be associated with less risk of mild cognitive impairment—a stage between normal aging and dementia—or of transitioning from mild cognitive impairment into Alzheimer's disease, according to a report in the February issue of *Archives of Neurology*.

"Among behavioral traits, diet may play an important role in the cause and prevention of Alzheimer's disease," the authors write as background information in the article. Previous studies have shown a lower risk for Alzheimer's disease among those who eat a Mediterranean diet, characterized by high intakes of fish, vegetables, legumes, fruits, cereals and unsaturated fatty acids, low intakes of dairy products, meat and saturated fats and moderate alcohol consumption.

Nikolaos Scarmeas, M.D., and colleagues at Columbia University Medical Center, New York, calculated a score for adherence to the Mediterranean diet among 1,393 individuals with no cognitive problems and 482 patients with mild cognitive impairment. Participants were originally examined, interviewed, screened for cognitive impairments and asked to complete a food frequency questionnaire between 1992 and 1999.

Over an average of 4.5 years of follow-up, 275 of the 1,393 who did not have mild cognitive impairment developed the condition. Compared with the one-third who had the lowest scores for Mediterranean diet adherence, the one-third with the highest scores for Mediterranean diet

adherence had a 28 percent lower risk of developing mild cognitive impairment and the one-third in the middle group for Mediterranean diet adherence had a 17 percent lower risk.

Among the 482 with mild cognitive impairment at the beginning of the study, 106 developed Alzheimer's disease over an average 4.3 years of follow-up. Adhering to the Mediterranean diet also was associated with a lower risk for this transition. The one-third of participants with the highest scores for Mediterranean diet adherence had 48 percent less risk and those in the middle one-third of Mediterranean diet adherence had 45 percent less risk than the one-third with the lowest scores.

The Mediterranean diet may improve cholesterol levels, blood sugar levels and blood vessel health overall, or reduce inflammation, all of which have been associated with mild cognitive impairment. Individual food components of the diet also may have an influence on cognitive risk. "For example, potentially beneficial effects for mild cognitive impairment or mild cognitive impairment conversion to Alzheimer's disease have been reported for alcohol, fish, polyunsaturated fatty acids (also for age-related cognitive decline) and lower levels of saturated fatty acids," they write.

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