

Diet may not impact certain health outcomes in older persons

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Eating diets high in sugar and fat may not affect the health outcomes of older adults ages 75 and up, suggesting that placing people of such advanced age on overly restrictive diets to treat their excess weight or other conditions may have little benefit, according to researchers at Penn State and Geisinger Healthcare System.

"Historically people thought of older persons as tiny and frail," said Gordon Jensen, head of the Department of [Nutritional Sciences](#) at Penn State, "but that paradigm has changed for many older persons. Currently, 30 percent or more may be overweight, and by 2030, almost 30 percent are projected to be obese, not just overweight. Recent reports even suggest that there may be survival benefits associated with overweight and mild obesity status among the elderly."

"We all know that adverse [dietary patterns](#), such as a [Western diet](#) containing high amounts of fat or a diet containing high amounts of refined sugar, both of which may contribute to obesity, are associated with adverse medical conditions and health outcomes for many people, but until now, the [health effects](#) of these types of poor diets have not been characterized for people who live to 75 years of age and older," said Pao Ying Hsao, postdoctoral fellow at Penn State.

The team's research is part of a decades-long collaborative study between Penn State and the Geisinger [Healthcare System](#) on the effects of [nutritional status](#) and diet on the health of more than 20,000 older people living in Pennsylvania. In the current study, the team followed

449 individuals for five years who were on average 76.5 years old at the beginning of the study.

"This is one of the first studies to examine obesity-related health outcomes and dietary patterns in such aged persons," Jensen said.

At study baseline, the team assessed the participants' dietary patterns by calling each of them by telephone four or five times during a 10-month period and asking them about their diets over the previous 24 hours. The participants were categorized as adhering to one of three different dietary patterns. The "sweets and dairy" pattern was characterized by the largest proportions of energy from baked goods, milk, sweetened coffee and tea and dairy-based desserts, and the lowest intakes of poultry. The "health-conscious" pattern was characterized by relatively higher intakes of pasta, noodles, rice, whole fruit, poultry, nuts, fish and vegetables, and lower intakes of fried vegetables, processed meats and soft drinks. The "Western" pattern was characterized by higher intakes of bread, eggs, fats, fried vegetables, alcohol and soft drinks, and the lowest intakes of milk and whole fruit.

Using outpatient electronic medical records, the researchers identified whether the participants developed cardiovascular disease, diabetes mellitus, hypertension (high blood pressure) and metabolic syndrome during the five-year period. They found no relationship between dietary pattern and prevalence of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, metabolic syndrome or mortality in the participants; however, they did find an increased risk of hypertension in people who followed the "sweets and dairy" pattern.

The results appeared in this month's issue of the *Journal of Nutrition Health and Aging*.

"We don't know if the participants had been following these dietary

patterns their entire adult lives, but we suspect they had been because people don't usually change dietary practices all that much," Jensen said. "The results suggest that if you live to be this old, then there may be little to support the use of overly restrictive dietary prescriptions, especially where food intake may already be inadequate. However, people who live on prudent diets all their lives are likely to have better [health outcomes](#)."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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