

# Researcher finds healthy eating reduces risk of premature death

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A recent study has shown for the first time that a small, simple improvement in diet over the long-term – such as replacing one sugary beverage with a serving of nuts each day—may significantly reduce the risk of premature death.

The diet quality study conducted by Mercedes Sotos-Prieto, an assistant professor of nutrition in OHIO's College of Health Sciences and Professions, was released by the Harvard T.H. Chan Schools of Public Health and published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in July, 2017, shows that eating more whole grains, vegetables, fruits, nuts, and fish and less red and processed meats and sugary beverages over at least twelve years lowers total and cardiovascular mortality.

"Overall, our findings underscore the benefits of healthy eating patterns including the Mediterranean diet and the DASH diet. Our study indicates that even modest improvements in diet quality could meaningfully influence mortality risk and conversely, worsening diet quality may increase the risk," said Sotos-Prieto, who worked as the lead author on the study as a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard.

Using three different diet quality scoring methods, the research determined that eating a high quality diet over a 12-year period was linked to a reduced risk of death in the next 12 years. Foods that most improved diet quality were whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and fish or n-3 fatty acids.

According to a Harvard press release, Sotos-Prieto and colleagues analyzed the association between changes in diet quality among nearly 74,000 adults over a 12-year period (1986-1998) and their risk of dying over the subsequent 12 years (1998-2010). Data came from two long-term studies, the Nurses' Health Study and the Health Professionals' Follow-up Study, in which participants answered questions about their diets every four years and about their lifestyle and health every two years.

A 20 percent increase in diet-quality scores was associated with an 8 to 17 percent reduction in the risk of death, while decreased [diet quality](#) was associated with a 6 percent to 12 percent increase in the risk. Even among those who had relatively unhealthy diets at the beginning of the study but whose diet scores improved significantly, the risk of death in following years was reduced.

Dhiraj Vattem, director of CHSP's School of Applied Health Sciences and Wellness, says a benefit of this particular research is that people can easily make lifestyle changes that have a proven health benefit.

"Dr. Sotos-Prieto's paper further corroborates accumulating evidence on the effect of healthy [diet](#) on human morbidity and mortality. It is important to note that her findings show that modifying dietary habits can have a significant impact on health outcomes, a recommendation that can easily be communicated to everyone and therefore has global relevance. Further research in this area especially with dietary and lifestyle interventions will provide critical insight to policy makers and industry to develop and implement long term strategies to prevent chronic diseases, improve quality of life and reduce health-care costs associated with these conditions," Vattem said.

Provided by Ohio University

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