

Health Insights Today

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Nutrition Update

When reading reports on new research, it is important to remember that no single study should be seen as providing the whole truth. The following reports offer helpful clues but in most cases further research is needed before firm conclusions can be drawn.

American Dietetic Association: Vegetarian and Vegan Diets Appropriate at All Stages of Life

After a thorough evaluation of all scientific studies on vegan and vegetarian nutrition, the ADA declares, "It is the position of the American Dietetic Association that appropriately planned vegetarian diets, including total vegetarian or vegan diets, are healthful, nutritionally adequate, and may provide health benefits in the prevention and treatment of certain diseases. Well-planned vegetarian diets are appropriate for individuals during all stages of the lifecycle, including pregnancy, lactation, infancy, childhood, and adolescence, and for athletes."

The evidence leading toward the endorsement starts early in the article, with details following soon thereafter. Here's the summary of health effects: "Vegetarian diets are often associated with a number of health advantages, including lower blood cholesterol levels, lower risk of heart disease, lower blood pressure levels, and lower risk of hypertension and type 2 diabetes. Vegetarians tend to have a lower body mass index (BMI) and lower overall cancer rates. Vegetarian diets tend to be lower in saturated fat and cholesterol, and have higher levels of dietary fiber, magnesium and potassium, vitamins C and E, folate, carotenoids, flavonoids, and other phytochemicals. These nutritional differences may explain some of the health advantages of those following a varied, balanced vegetarian diet."

Craig WJ, Mangels AR. Position of the American Dietetic Association: vegetarian diets. *J Am Diet Assoc.* Jul 2009;109(7):1266-1282.

Benefits of Mediterranean Diet Due to Plant Components, Moderate Alcohol

Greek researchers have for the first time quantified the relative importance of the various aspects of the Mediterranean diet, which has attained an evidence-based reputation for enhancing health and prolonging life. A team from the University of Athens concluded that the high-plant, low-meat aspects of the diet were central (along with moderate alcohol intake), with dairy and fish playing an insignificant role. The dominant components of the Mediterranean diet score as a predictor of lower mortality are moderate consumption of ethanol, low consumption of meat and meat products, and high consumption of vegetables, fruits and nuts, olive oil, and legumes.

Trichopoulou A, Bamia C, Trichopoulos D. Anatomy of health effects of Mediterranean diet: Greek EPIC prospective cohort study. *BMJ.* 2009;338:b2337.

Smoked Meat and Fish Increase Leukemia Risk

Researchers in Taiwan report that eating consumption of cured/smoked meat and fish more than once a week is associated with an increased risk of acute leukemia due to a mechanism involving the nitrites and nitrosamines in these foods. Conversely, higher intake of vegetables and bean-curd (tofu) was associated with a reduced risk. No statistically significant association was observed between leukemia risk and the consumption of pickled vegetables, fruits, and tea.

Liu CY, Hsu YH, Wu MT, et al. Cured meat, vegetables, and bean-curd foods in relation to childhood acute leukemia risk: a population based case-control study. *BMC Cancer.* 2009;9:15.

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Garden Projects Encourage Children to Eat More Vegetables and Fruits

Despite unanimous agreement among experts that increased vegetable and fruit consumption yields wide-ranging health benefits, few successful projects have cracked the code on how to convince children to eat more. An increasing number of schools and communities are incorporating direct gardening experiences into strategies to increase dietary quantities of vegetables and fruits.

In a very encouraging recent study, 4th to 6th grade children attending a YMCA summer camp participated in a 12-week program designed to promote fruit and vegetable intake. Children participated in garden-based activities twice per week. Most children (97.8%) enjoyed taste-testing fruits and vegetables. Children also liked preparing fruit and vegetable snacks (93.4%), working in their garden (95.6%), and learning about fruits and vegetables (91.3%). Impact data suggest that the intervention led to an increase in the number of fruits and vegetables ever eaten, vegetable preferences, and fruit and vegetable asking behavior at home.

Heim S, Stang J, Ireland M. A garden pilot project enhances fruit and vegetable consumption among children. *J Am Diet Assoc.* Jul 2009;109(7):1220-1226.

Robinson-O'Brien R, Story M, Heim S. Impact of garden-based youth nutrition intervention programs: a review. *J Am Diet Assoc.* Feb 2009;109(2):273-280.