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Eating wide variety of fruits, veggies cuts cognitive decline risk: S'pore study

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Individuals who consume a wide variety and substantial quantity of fruits and vegetables during their midlife are less likely to suffer cognitive impairment in their later years, a study has found.



Researchers discovered that participants who consumed an average of around 520g of fruit and vegetables a day were 23 per cent less likely to be cognitive impaired than those who consume an average of 165g a day.

The study – led by Dr Koh Woon Puay, a professor at the Healthy Longevity Translational Research Programme at the National University of Singapore's Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine – also found that increasing the variety of fruits and vegetables consumed reduced the risk of cognitive decline, independent of quantity.

Dr Koh, a corresponding author of the study, said: “It is not enough to just eat more; increasing the variety in the consumption of fruits and vegetables is also important in improving health.”

The study, which was published in the British Journal of Nutrition in March, is the first known study to examine variety independent of quantity intake.

Researchers used data from the Singapore Chinese Health Study, which collected dietary patterns of more than 63,000 Chinese Singaporeans aged 45 to 74 years between 1993 and 1998.

A total of 14 fruits and 25 vegetables were included in the study.

Twenty years after the study, a follow-up interview was conducted to measure cognitive function, and 16,737 participants made up the final study population.

The study observed that participants who consumed an average of 10 types of fruit a month were 22 per cent less likely to be cognitive impaired, compared with those who consumed four types.

Participants who consumed 22 types of vegetables monthly had a 13 per cent lower risk, compared with those who consumed an average of 13 types.

Fruits were further categorised according to their glycemic index. Those with a low glycemic index cause a slower rise in blood sugar.

Vegetable categories included mushrooms, light green vegetables, dark green vegetables and yellow vegetables.

Research found that consumption of fruits with a low glycemic index such as apples and peaches, and vegetables from the mushroom and light green vegetables categories were associated with a lower risk of cognitive decline.

Dr Koh said the findings would be applicable across all races.

She said: “(The lower risk of decline) is due to biological factors... Nutrients and antioxidants in fruits and vegetables are good for protecting brain function.”

Dr Chan Tat Hon, who did not participate in the study, said he hopes the study will spur Singaporeans to change their diet.

Dr Chan, who teaches patients how to make dietary modifications to reduce the risk of chronic diseases, added: “This study is extremely actionable. We can start (reducing the risks of declining cognitive ability) today, immediately.”