Dietary Fats: Friend or Foe?

New research suggests previously unknown benefits

Friday, October 8, 2021

-
-
-

UNH researchers have [published their findings](#) in the British Journal of Nutrition on the connection between cognitive function and dietary fat consumption in Hispanic/Latino adults, and the news may be surprising. The researchers, using data from 8,942 participants in Hispanic Community Health Study/Study of Latinos (HCHS/SOL), found that greater consumption of short and medium chain saturated fatty acids primarily

consumed through milk and cheese products was associated with better overall cognitive function.

"To put it simply this research is important because everyone eats! Food is part of everyone's life and can have preventive health benefits," says Nikki Karazurna, '20G, who received her master's degree in nutritional science from UNH and is the article's lead author. "With that being said there are a lot of misconceptions and misinformation about what foods are 'good' or 'bad' for you, with dietary fat often mistaken as a 'bad' food."

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans, published by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), recommends limiting consumption of saturated fats to less than 10% of daily caloric intake. Karazurna's findings suggest that some forms of saturated fats, including certain fatty acids found in whole milk and cheeses, may be healthier for cognitive function than previously believed. The findings, says Sherman Bigornia, assistant professor of nutrition, represent a call-to-action on reevaluating the role of saturated fatty acids in our diets. "Our research provides some support that whole fat dairy products may be part of a healthy dietary pattern for brain health," he says.

Research on the health implications of fat consumption has often produced conflicting results. To side-step the limitations of previous studies which only looked at total saturated, monounsaturated or poly unsaturated fat consumption, Karazurna analyzed how individual fats of different lengths influenced cognition. Another source of error in older studies, she says, is the focus on white European-descended subjects. The researchers opted to focus on U.S. Hispanic/Latinos because preliminary work suggests that they are at greater risk for developing debilitating cognitive diseases including dementia. Karazurna hopes that by subdividing the available data based on ethnicity and specified types of saturated fats dietitians may be able to better tailor public health recommendations.

"While more research is needed to expand on our findings, it brings to light the benefits dietary fats may offer. It also highlights that not ALL fats are the same, an important concept many people are not aware of," says Karazurna.

The research was conducted by Karazurna as part of her master's thesis in nutritional science in Sherman Bigornia's Lab. Bigornia, Caitlin Porter, Semra Aytur, Tammy Scott, Josiemer Mattei, Sabrina Noel, Hector Gonzalez, Yasmin Mossavar-Rahmani, Daniela Sotres-Alvarez, Linda Gallo, Martha Daviglus, Linda Van Horn, Tali Elfassy, Marc Gellman, Ashley Moncrieft, Katherine Tucker and Robert Kaplan also made notable contributions to this work, which was funded through multiple grants from the National Institute of Health (NIH).

Bigornia is currently expanding the research to include an additional cohort from the Boston Puerto Rican Health Study. He is waiting for the results of a six-year follow up on the HCHS/SOL cohort that could help add a time component to the data as well as reinforce the study's findings.

- WRITTEN BY:

[Ryan Wilmot](#) | UNH College of Life Sciences and Agriculture

Like us on Facebook

Follow us on Twitter

Follow us on YouTube

Follow us on Instagram

Find us on LinkIn

UNH Today RSS feeds