

SENIORS NEED TO KNOW

BY IRWIN A. HERMAN, MD

“Eat your fish; it’s brain food!”

I heard that very often from my mother while growing up. But, how did they know that way back then, especially before there was any general knowledge of polyunsaturates, transfats, polyphenols, etc, etc, etc?

Today, we are justifiably overwhelmed with information about obesity, heart disease and avoiding “bad” fats in our diets as well as taking anti-cholesterol medications (when appropriate) while also increasing our physical activity. All good information of course, but the underlying message is one of avoidance that to some, psychologically, takes on a negative connotation and resistance.

However, good nutritional health involves not only the heart, but importantly benefits other systems as well. One cannot pick up a food article without seeing mention of flavonoids, lycopenes, anthocyanins, anti-oxidants and more that leads to a mad dash to the iPad, Google, or whatever else you use for your “411” resource. Do we need to know all of that? Not really, but it is necessary to understand that those chemical compounds are vital to the maintenance and function of our body’s organ systems and more importantly, where to find them. Today, I want to concentrate primarily on the brain.

What we’ll want to do is to think about those beneficial foods in a positive way by emphasizing several basic disease risk factors that can be reduced or even in some cases eliminated. The four major risks we’ll address are those that are part of mental and neurological health, including Depression, Alzheimer’s or Cognitive Impairment, Psychosis and Ischemic (non-hemorrhagic) Stroke.

The basic nutritional elements are found in what is known as the “Mediterranean Diet” composed of fruits, vegetables, nuts, whole grains, olive oil and fish. These will be a mainstay for all four disease processes in combination with another product that may be surprising to some, especially in the recommended amounts. Unless otherwise stated, the quantities of the individual food categories should be in keeping with your normal daily dietary intake. Also, these are meant to be guidelines as noted in several studies and journals such as the FDA, the Nurses Health Initiative, the Swedish Medical Society study and The New England Journal of Medicine. Some long-term research studies are still on going and not published as yet but indicate some anecdotal corroboration. It should be noted, that when fish is advised, it refers to the oily, cold-water varieties such as salmon, trout, herring and mackerel.

DEPRESSION:

Contrary to popular opinion, depression in older adults is **NOT** a normal part of ageing! It in fact leads to the highest rate of suicide in any age group! While there may be many normally occurring precipitating factors, it is a disease that requires treatment and so anything that can help its prevention, like good nutrition, becomes very important.

The Mediterranean diet noted above plus foods such as avocados and green leafy vegetables has been shown to help reduce depression by as much as 30% when compared to a heavy meat and dairy diet. The addition of 4 cups of CAFFEINATED coffee per day can also reduce depression by 30% but no information is given if these two are cumulative. However, there is a downside to be considered later.

ALZHEIMER'S AND COGNITIVE IMPAIRMENT:

While research progress continues to be made on the above disorders, there are nutritional choices that can help delay or mitigate the progression of the problems. Once again, the Mediterranean diet associated with a consistent physical activity program seems to offer some benefits. The addition of darkly pigmented fruits, particularly berries such as blueberries or strawberries, are recommended. Alcohol, especially red wine (one 6 oz glass per day for women and 2 glasses per day for men) is thought to be of value. Coffee, 3 –5 cups per day, seems to slow progression of impairment.

PSYCHOSIS:

Mental illnesses other than depression also seem to improve with diets moderately high in fish and natural fish oil products. However, it is interesting that the Omega 3 supplements have no positive benefit. And, heavy fish diets seem to make the conditions worse; something that a mental health professional would need to monitor.

ISCHEMIC STROKES:

Most of the information on this problem comes from the long term Nurses Health Study. This type of brain damage, caused by a deficiency of oxygen getting to the brain, usually by narrowing of the blood vessels that nourish this organ, is the more common central nervous system defect. The major beneficial nutritional foods seem to be of an acidic nature. High intake of grapefruit and orange products produced a 19% decrease risk of stroke. In men, it seems that tomatoes are more effective in reducing risk. This is also another condition where the darker pigmented fruits (berries) and vegetables are helpful. In addition coffee, 1

to 3 cups daily according to a Swedish study, and 3 oz per week of dark chocolate produces a 17% drop in risk as well as adding some pleasure.

This is not meant to be opposed to red meat or dairy products since they also play a very vital role in maintaining our body's health, so it is important to reaffirm an ancient Greek teaching that says, "nothing in excess, everything in moderation."

And now the surprise - the inclusion of coffee as an important adjunct to nutritional balance in maintaining our health, at the doses suggested, namely from 2 to 6 cups per day. Some have gone so far as to call coffee a "wonder drug" for all the benefits it produces. Among these are a decreased risk of uterine, some breast, prostate and basal cell cancers. It may be a preventative against Lewy Body dementia. Coffee reduces dry eye and gout symptoms in some individuals and seems to be protective against MRSA, Methycillin Resistant Staph Aureus, a very serious infectious disease.

Unfortunately, in some people, it can increase anxiety, tremors and glaucoma risk. Even so, I raise a cup to your good health!

Dr. Irwin A. Herman is a member of the Placer OAAC. As one of our regular contributors, the opinions expressed in this article are Dr. Herman's.

The Older Adult Advisory Commission is responsible for advising the Department of Health and Human Services and the Board of Supervisors on the needs of Placer County's older adults. Meetings are held the 3rd Tuesday at 1:00 PM. More information may be found online at:

<http://www.placer.ca.gov/Departments/hhs/adult/OlderAdultAdvisoryCommission.aspx>

or by calling the Public Authority at (530) 886-3680.