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Trimming the fat didn't cut their health risks

Study of 48,000 older women found diet had no effect

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You might as well face it. Passing up that steak-and-fries dinner will not significantly reduce your risk of cancer and heart disease if you're an older woman, according to a new study released today.

Still, dietitians are warning against the temptation of super-sizing your favorite indulgence based on what many are calling the disappointing results of the research reported in today's Journal of the American Medical Association.

The national study, which included more than 48,000 women, found there was no significant difference in the rates of breast cancer, heart disease, stroke or colorectal cancer for postmenopausal women who followed a low-fat diet, as compared with those who didn't.

"At the end of the day, we don't want people to give up following a healthy diet, even if the results are a bit contradictory to what we've been practicing," said Milton Stokes, a registered dietitian who also is a spokesman for the American Dietetic Association.

"This study demonstrates that colorectal cancer does not care if you eat a low-fat diet of apples and broccoli. Protect yourself by getting screened," said Nancy Roach, chairwoman of the board of directors and founder of the Colorectal Cancer Coalition.

Scientists who carried out the eight-year Institutes of Health venture believe the \$415 million study was hardly a waste of money, however. They say the real benefits could still lie ahead.

That's because the women -- who may have jumped on the healthier eating bandwagon later in life than they should have-- will be followed for an additional five years.

And there is some encouraging data to build on.

For instance, the study found a 9 percent lower risk of breast cancer in women who reduced their total fat intake, compared to those in a group who didn't. Unfortunately, the difference was not large enough to be statistically significant.

In addition, women who reduced their total fat intake also lowered their incidence of polyps, which could put them at lower risk of colorectal cancer.

"There are reasonable, positive signs that we could see more dramatic results in the future, even if they don't continue to follow the diet to the letter," said Norman Lasser, the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey professor who was principal investigator for the study in New Jersey, where 1,800 women participated.

A preventive cardiologist and professor at the UMDNJ-New Jersey Medical School in Newark, Lasser said the message of the study for older women is clearly not to "go back and start eating all the fat you want."

Susan Yemin, 64, a Westfield grandmother, said she has no intention of doing so.

The retired Prudential corporate employee said being a participant not only forced her to become more aware of her food choices, but also helped her lose weight. Yemin, who is 5-feet-8 inches tall, was about 155 pounds when she started the study and managed to drop down to 142 at one point.

"The biggest thing for me was desserts ... I never realized how much fat there was in these things before because I never really paid attention," she said.

Yemin also ate lots more daily servings of fruits and vegetables and traded potatoes most of the time in favor of brown rice.

"I still feel overall it's a healthy diet and a good way to eat, even if the (study) results say otherwise," said Yemin, adding her husband's support was crucial in helping her stick to the healthier eating regimen.

Funded by the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, the study included women whose average age was 62. The focus was on total fat reduction, which made it different from other diets -- such as those aimed at reducing heart disease -- because it did not differentiate between "good fats," like those found in fish and nuts, and "bad" fats, like saturated fat.

"The women met in groups with a nutritionist, who talked to them about how they could eat less fat," Lasser explained.

Yemin, who also exercises regularly, said she and the other participants were even provided with recipes, including one for a squash and black bean soup that she just whipped up this week.

"I've made (low-fat) entrees, desserts and all kinds of things," she said.

Cancer experts called the study an important one, but say its narrow focus means the scientific debate about low-fat diets and cancer reduction will continue.

"The American Cancer Society's recommendations for cancer prevention are based on broad dietary guidelines, rather than focusing on just one part of the diet," said Alfred Ashford, chief medical officer for New Jersey and New York.

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