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Omega-3 fats lower blood pressure.

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It is a well-known fact that foods containing omega-3 fatty acids may help reduce the risk for heart disease. But a new study published in the June issue of the on-line medical journal, Hypertension, says a diet rich in foods that contain omega-3 fatty acids - such as oily fish, nuts, seeds and vegetable oils - can also assist in lowering blood pressure, even if the person does not suffer from hypertension (high blood pressure).

Scientists from Shiga University in Japan worked with a number of international colleagues to study almost 5,000 adults aged between 40 and 59 living in China, Japan, the UK and USA. Their study - called Intermap - looks at a range of lifestyle factors, particularly the influence of diet on blood pressure. What they found, after adjusting for variables such as age, gender, weight, salt intake and exercise (all of which are known to have an effect on blood pressure), was those whose diets were rich in omega-3 fatty acids had, on average, slightly lower blood pressure than others who ate less omega-3 fats.

Although the amount of blood pressure reduction is small, it is still significant, say the researchers. "With blood pressure, every millimetre counts," explains Shiga University's Dr Hirotsugu Ueshima. "If you can reduce blood pressure a few millimetres from eating less salt, losing a few pounds, avoiding heavy drinking, eating more vegetables, whole grains and fruits (for their fiber, minerals, vegetable protein and other nutrients) and getting more omega-3 fatty acids, then you've made a big difference," he adds.

In the Intermap study, the diets richest in omega-3 fatty acids were associated with a decrease in blood pressure (both systolic and diastolic) of greater than 1mmHg. According to the report's authors, previous studies suggest that a blood pressure decrease of just 2mmHg is enough to reduce a population's average death rate from stroke an estimated 6%, and from coronary heart disease 4%.

How to get your omega-3s

According to the study's authors, people can boost their intake of omega-3 fatty acids by eating more nuts such as walnuts, seeds such as flax seed and vegetable oil such as canola and soy bean oil, as well as increasing their intake of unsalted, cooked fish such as trout, mackerel, herring and sardines. One of the main omega-3 fatty acids found in oily fish is eicosapentaenoic acid. VegEPA from Igennu, combines ultra-pure EPA from marine fish oil and GLA (gamma-linolenic acid, an omega-6 fatty acid) from organic virgin evening primrose oil. The GLA content in VegEPA contains plant-derived substances called triterpenes, which, in studies, have been shown to protect cells against oxidative damage - which is also believed to be good for the heart, says Igennu.

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