

Wednesday 16 May 2018

New research: Omega-6 fats may help prevent cognitive decline

Australian-first research has found eating a diet higher in omega-6 fats to be associated with better cognition in older Australians.

According to Dr Amanda Patterson, who is presenting her research at the [Dietitians Association of Australia's National Conference](#) in Sydney this week, older adults with higher intakes of omega-6 fatty acids, but not other types of fatty acids, scored better across five cognitive domains, including language and attention – measured by the Audio Recorded Cognitive Screen (ARCS) tool¹.

Dr Patterson's research involved 2,750 adults, aged 55-86 years, from the Hunter region of New South Wales.

“Our findings suggest that a higher intake of omega-6 fatty acids, found in a range of plant-based foods including nuts and seeds, and polyunsaturated oils like canola and sunflower oil, might be protective against cognitive decline in older Australians.

“Given that age-related cognitive impairment is a fast-growing problem in Australia and across the globe, finding ways to prevent or decrease it is a public health imperative,” said Dr Patterson, from the University of Newcastle.

She said linoleic acid and other omega-6 polyunsaturated fatty acids are key components of cell membranes, with an important role in the development, maintenance, function and integrity of cells.

Dr Patterson, an Accredited Practising Dietitian, said specific dietary patterns can influence a person's cognitive performance throughout their life.

“The Mediterranean diet is the most studied dietary pattern to date, being convincingly linked with lower rates of cognitive decline, and also better cognitive function and reduced risk of Alzheimer's disease,” said Dr Patterson.

She said the Mediterranean diet is characterized by a high intake of healthy oils, fish, vegetables, fruits, nuts, seeds, legumes, and cereals – a dietary pattern she recommends, including for older Australians.

And because it includes a wide range of foods and food groups, it also incorporates a range of fatty acids, including monounsaturated fatty acids, both omega-3 and omega-6 polyunsaturated fatty acids, and small amounts of saturated fatty acids.

“When we think of the Mediterranean diet, we often think of fish and the beneficial omega-3s it offers, and also olive oil as a source of healthy monounsaturated fats. But the cognitive benefits of the Mediterranean diet might be due to many different components of the diet, and the combinations of these – including all the fatty acids it contains, with plant-based omega-6 fats a key part of this,” said Dr Patterson.

MEDIA RELEASE

She recommends older Australians eat nutrient-dense foods, including vegetables, legumes, fruit, good quality grain (cereal) foods, nuts and seeds, lean meat and fish, dairy foods, and plant-based oils which contain predominantly polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats.

In 2015, around 1.3 per cent of the Australian population were estimated to have dementia, with this expected to rise to four per cent by 2050⁽²⁾. And according to Alzheimer's Australia, dementia cost Australia around \$14 billion in 2016, up from an earlier estimate of around \$6.6 billion in 2002ⁱⁱ.

Dr Patterson said further research is needed into the effect of omega-6 fatty acids on cognitive ageing.

ENDS

For further information or to organise an interview with Amanda Patterson APD, contact Maree Hall on 0408 482 581 or Sally Moloney on 0428 916 425.

Background

About the Dietitians Association of Australia National Conference

The DAA National Conference is being held from 17-19 May 2018 at the Sydney International Convention Centre. For more information and program details, visit: www.daa2018.com.au and follow us on Twitter: www.twitter.com/DAA_feed (and use #DAA2018).

Press passes can be made available for interested media (including Australian-based journalists from print, radio, television and online media outlets) to attend sessions at the conference. To request a press pass, please contact Maree Hall on 0408 482 581.

ⁱ The Audio Recorded Cognitive Screen (ARCS) is an objective self-administered clinical measure of cognitive performance. It is designed to identify distinct patterns of cognitive impairment through analysis of the major cognitive domains: verbal episodic memory, verbal fluency, visuospatial functioning, language, attention and executive function and speed of writing.

ⁱⁱ The Economic Costs of Dementia in Australia 2016-2056. Available at: <https://www.dementia.org.au/files/NATIONAL/documents/The-economic-cost-of-dementia-in-Australia-2016-to-2056.pdf>