

Antioxidant-Rich Foods Preserve Vision



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TUESDAY, Dec. 27 (HealthDay News) -- Mom was right, at least about carrots and eyesight.

Eating carrots, which are rich in the nutrient beta carotene, as well as foods containing the antioxidant vitamins C and E and zinc, results in a significantly reduced risk of age-related macular degeneration in elderly people, a new Dutch study has found.

"It's great news," said Dr. Robert Cykiert, a professor of ophthalmology at New York University School of Medicine. "It's an excellent way to prevent a condition that's difficult to treat."

The findings appear in the Dec. 28 issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

Macular degeneration, a progressive eye condition, attacks the macula, where your sharpest central vision occurs. The condition affects 15 million people in the United States alone, and is the most common cause of irreversible blindness in developed countries.

The disease rarely causes complete blindness, but it robs you of all but your outermost, peripheral vision, leaving just dim images or black holes at the center of your vision.

The incidence of age-related macular degeneration (AMD) increases sharply with age, and its prevalence is expected to rise.

"We're expecting to see more AMD because the Baby Boomer generation is approaching that age, and everyone is living longer," Cykiert said. "It potentially could be devastating."

Currently, age-related macular degeneration affects 11.5 percent of white people over the age of 80. The number of people severely disabled by late-stage AMD in the United States is expected to increase by more than 50 percent, to 3 million, in the next 20 years.

Previous studies evaluating antioxidants had shown conflicting results, with one major study showing that raising levels of beta carotene, vitamins C and E and zinc in people with early or single-eye late AMD resulted in a 25 percent reduction in the progression to late AMD over five years.

The new study sought to evaluate whether antioxidants as present in normal foods could play a role in preventing age-related macular degeneration.

At the beginning of the study, 5,836 people living in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, who were at risk of AMD were identified. Of these, 4,170 participated in the eight-year follow-up.

Participants were asked to fill out food questionnaires and were given periodic eye exams.

People who consumed higher levels of vitamin E and zinc had about a 10 percent lower risk of developing age-

related macular degeneration. Those who had an above-average intake of all four nutrients (beta carotene, vitamin C, vitamin E and zinc) had a 35 percent reduced risk of AMD. Adding nutritional supplements to people who already had a high intake of these nutrients did not change the results.

People who consumed below-average amounts of these nutrients had a 20 percent increased risk of developing AMD, the study said.

Vitamin E is found in whole grains, vegetable oil, eggs and nuts; zinc in meat, poultry, fish, whole grains and dairy products; beta carotene in vegetables such as carrots, kale and spinach; and vitamin C in citrus fruits and juices, green peppers, broccoli and potatoes.

Although the study results still need to be confirmed, they do add valuable information, the researchers said.

"Up to now, we thought you needed to take heavy doses of supplements to achieve the benefits of these antioxidants," Cykiert said. "Now we know that if you eat a diet rich in these substances you achieve the same benefit, and possibly even more."

"If people start eating these things now, it may be a way to prevent problems 10, 15 or 20 years later," he added.

More information

To learn more about age-related eye disease, visit the National Eye Institute.

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