

Here's the skinny on low-fat diets

BY ERIN ANDERSEN / Lincoln Journal Star

Sunday, Feb 26, 2006 - 12:07:52 am CST

You may be inclined to gorge on pizza pie, pile on the whipped cream and scream for quadruple scoops of Ben & Jerry's Chunky Monkey ice cream now that you know a low-fat diet doesn't reduce women's risk of heart disease, stroke, breast cancer and colon cancer. The eight-year study of nearly 50,000 women by the Women's Health Initiative found no evidence that reducing fat in their diets improved their health. And after a decade of choosing lite mayo, fat-free ranch dressing and baked potato chips over all the good tasting real stuff, we find it may have been for naught. Well, maybe not, says Dr. Ryan Whitney, cardiologist with BryanLGH Heart Institute.

"This doesn't give people dietary license to hang out at Culver's all afternoon," Whitney said.

Darn! The study looked at women age 50 and older. Many of them were overweight. About 40 percent of the participants were encouraged to eat more fruits and vegetables and reduce their overall fat intake to a goal of no more than 20 percent of their daily calories. Over the course of the study, the women cut their total fat intake from 35 to 38 percent to 24 to 29 percent. The control group of women continued to eat the same amount of fat as before.

But this study was started before doctors and researchers were fully aware of the variety of fats, Whitney said.

"They lowered all the fat in the diet — saturated, mono unsaturated, poly unsaturated," he said.

Some fats, such as saturated and trans fats, are bad. But other fats, including mono unsaturated, poly unsaturated and omega 3 found in fish, nuts and vegetable oils, are actually good for the body — so good that doctors actually tell patients to increase the amount of those fats they eat.

So what if just the bad fats were lowered? Or what if people actually increased the amount of good fat they ate? Would that make a difference?

Only research and time will tell, but Whitney is confident researchers would find good fat can reduce risks and improve health.

And reducing the bad fats earlier than middle age, could also reveal a reduced risk of heart attack, stroke, colon cancer and breast cancer.

Still, if you've been eating low fat for years under the notion it could prolong your health, don't these study results make you want stick out your tongue and dive face first into a banana split the size of your head?

No, says Esther Fox.

"For me they can say that if they want," Fox said of the study's findings, but it won't change her diet.

"There are other health benefits that go along with eating a low-fat diet or eating proper portions," she said.

Fox, 65, whose goal is to drop weight and lower her cholesterol, uses a combination approach to health — cutting the fat, eating more fruits and vegetables and getting more exercise.

"I just think that good nutrition has so many benefits, regardless of what studies say," Fox said.

Fat is just one piece of the (health) puzzle, said Karen McWilliams, nutritionist and dietician at BryanLGH Medical Center East.

"The whole dieting world has looked for one magic answer — and, of course, that has never worked."

Good health is a combination of factors — genes, what you eat, how much you eat and what you do, McWilliams said.

If anything, this study adds credence to what has been the focus of diets for decades — counting calories. In addition to eating the right kinds of calories, she said.

For most people, becoming overweight didn't happen overnight with a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken followed with a custard chaser.

Most people gain weight by eating 100 to 200 extra calories a day — that's the equivalent of a little more lasagna, an extra tablespoon of salad dressing or two Oreo Double Stuf Cookies. That's not a lot of extra food, but day after day that little bit extra ends up as fat rolls on our tummies, cottage cheese on our thighs, gunk coating our arteries and climbing cholesterol, blood pressure and triglyceride numbers, according to McWilliams.

People need TLC to decrease their health risks, she said. By that she means "therapeutic lifestyle changes."

They need to increase the fiber and complex carbohydrates in their diets. Eat functional foods that help the body process and cleanse itself. They need to exercise a minimum of 30 minutes a day.

And they need to know that all fats are not created equal.

Whitney's take on the study results?

"It certainly underscores the potential importance of substituting healthy fats for less healthy fats," he said.

"It really says a global low-fat diet isn't the way to go, but the intelligent low-fat diet way to go."

And when it comes to making the biggest impact in our health, Whitney says it's blood pressure, diet, cholesterol and exercise all "balled up into one."

"If you get all four of those healthy lifestyle changes at the same time — that is the holy grail," Whitney said.

Reach Erin Andersen at 473-7217 or eandersen@journalstar.com.

Take charge

What should women know and do about their health? Karen McWilliams, BryanLGH nutritionist and dietician, says this is what women need to do to take charge of their health:

- * Go to your annual exam and really talk to your doctor about your personal/family history, health history and your lifestyle plan.
- * Know your Body Mass Index. If you're overweight, come up with a plan to lose weight.
- * Get a lipid panel to find out your cholesterol, triglycerides, glucose levels, etc.
- * Take the results of that test and find out what you need to do to improve your health.
- * Check your knowledge. Learn about heart healthy cooking and the functional foods.
- * Exercise — 30 to 40 minutes a day is recommended.
- * If you smoke, quit.

Online dieting

Here are some Web sites that help you keep track of what's going in your mouth:

- * mypyramid.gov
- * fitday.com
- * lifeclinic.com
- * dietfacts.com

What you should eat

- * 3 ounces of whole grain cereals, breads, crackers, rice or pasta every day.
- * Dark green veggies such as broccoli, spinach and other dark leafy greens.
- * Orange vegetables such as carrots and sweet potatoes
- * Dry beans and peas such as pinto beans, kidney beans and lentils.
- * A variety of fruit. Choose fresh, frozen, canned or dried food. (Go easy on fruit juices.)
- * Low-fat or fat-free milk, yogurt and other milk products.
- * Low-fat or lean meats and poultry. Bake it, broil it or grill it. Vary your protein routine and choose more fish, beans, peas, nuts and seeds.

Source: mypyramid.gov