



When Food Choices Matter

Eating healthier in midlife is tied to less chronic disease as people age.

August 11, 2025 By National Institutes of Health

Several studies have shown links between healthy eating and prevention of chronic diseases, like diabetes or heart disease. Others have found ties between a high-quality diet and longer life. But less common are studies that examine the links between various dietary patterns and healthy aging overall, including the long-term impact of midlife food choices.

A research team examined data gathered in two long-term studies of health and lifestyle. The Nurses' Health Study enrolled women ages 30 to 55 years, and the Health Professionals Follow-Up Study enrolled men ages 40 to 75 years.

The team assessed participant data every four years beginning in 1986 for up to 30 years. Participants were excluded if they had a serious chronic disease at the start. The final study population included about 70,000 women and 35,000 men, for a total of more than 105,000 participants. Results appeared in *Nature Medicine*.

The researchers first examined how closely each participant's self-reported eating patterns adhered to eight different healthy diet patterns. Among these were the Alternative Healthy Eating Index, the DASH diet (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension, which is supported by the National Institutes of Health, or NIH), the MIND [Mediterranean Intervention for Neurodegenerative Delay] diet, the Planetary Health Diet Index and a Mediterranean diet. They also looked at intake of ultra-processed foods.

The team then assessed the links between adherence to each eating pattern and healthy aging at age 70 or older. They found that over 9% of participants, about 9,800 people, had achieved healthy aging. That is, they were free of major chronic disease and had positive measures of cognitive, physical and mental health.

Those who most closely followed the Alternative Healthy Eating Index were most likely to have healthy aging by age 70. The same held true by age 75. Those who mostly closely adhered to any

of the other healthy eating patterns also boosted their odds.

Regardless of diet, people who ate more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, unsaturated fats, nuts, legumes and low-fat dairy were more likely to have healthy aging. Healthy aging was less likely in those who ate more trans fats, salt, sugary drinks and red or processed meats.

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