

Update 11

DOES HEALTHY LIVING REALLY MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Two recent studies suggest the answer to the above question is definitely YES.

The first of those studies, published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, set out to investigate the effect of a Mediterranean diet, being physically active, moderate alcohol use, and nonsmoking on mortality in European elderly individuals. In total 1507 apparently healthy men and 832 women, aged 70 to 90 years from 11 European countries took part in this study that was carried out between 1988 and 2000.

During the 10-year follow-up, men and women between the ages of 70 and 90 years who had adhered to a Mediterranean diet, were nonsmokers or had stopped smoking more than 15 years ago, were physically active, and used alcohol moderately had less than half the mortality rate than those who did not. The authors found that the more healthful dietary and lifestyle factors a participant had, the lower the risk for death.

The authors concede that the number of years an individual needs to maintain such a lifestyle to realize a benefit is unknown. However, a **Mediterranean diet**, rich in plant foods in combination with **nonsmoking, moderate alcohol** consumption, and at least **30 minutes of physical activity per day** is associated with a significantly lower mortality rate, even in old age.

The second study, also published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, aimed to examine long-term regular physical activity, including walking, relative to brain function amongst older women.

This study including 18,766 US women aged 70 to 81 years. Women reported participation in leisure-time physical activities on mailed questionnaires beginning in 1986. The authors assessed long-term activity by averaging energy expenditures from questionnaires in 1986 through participants' brain function assessments (1995 to 2001).

The authors report that higher levels of activity were associated with better brain function. Compared with women who had the lowest physical activity levels, the authors found a 20% lower risk of brain function impairment for women in the highest physical activity levels. Among women performing the equivalent of walking at an easy pace for at least 1.5 hours/week, scores of brain function were statistically significantly higher compared with those women walking less than 40 minutes/week.

The authors concluded,

“Long-term regular physical activity, including walking, is associated with significantly better brain function in older women.”