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Vital Signs

Nutrition: Stay Sharp Longer, With Fish on Your Fork

By NICHOLAS BAKALAR

Fish just may be brain food.

In a new study, people 65 and older who ate fish once a week showed a 10 percent slower rate of cognitive decline per year compared with those who ate no fish. Eating fish two or more times a week was linked to a 13 percent slower decline, the study found.

The researchers collected data on 3,718 men and women. Each participant's [diet](#) was assessed with a questionnaire that asked about the frequency of intake of 139 foods over the last year.

Nondietary factors like physical activity, alcohol consumption and symptoms of [depression](#), [heart disease](#) and [hypertension](#) were included in the questionnaire. The study, now online at archneur.ama-assn.org, will appear in the December issue of Archives of Neurology.

Over the six years of the study, those who ate fish did significantly better on tests of memory and mental acuity than those who did not. The slower rate of decline among the fish eaters was the equivalent of being three to four years younger than those who ate no seafood.

Why fish seem to have this effect is still unclear, according to Martha C. Morris, an associate professor at the Rush University Medical Center and a co-author of the study.

"It could be the omega-3 fatty acids are the protective dietary component of fish," Dr. Morris said. "Or it could be that the fish meals are replacing other meals - for example, red meat - that are higher in saturated fat and lower in polyunsaturated fat."

Replacing fish with omega-3 pills or capsules may not help, Dr. Morris said, adding, "There is no evidence at all at this point that omega-3 fatty acid supplements have protective benefit."