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IF YOU EAT LESS, WILL YOU LIVE LONGER?

Maybe. Intriguing research points to the possibility.

By Elaine Rogers

Because you're weight-conscious and fitness-minded, you know about calories, carb-loading and the trend toward "eating light." You also know that a low-fat, high-carbohydrate diet will help battle heart disease and control your weight. What you don't know, however, is that eating light may also directly affect how long you live.

Researchers have long studied the connection between restricted diets and the longevity of rats and other laboratory animals – repeatedly concluding that limiting an animal's consumption lengthens its life by as much as 80 percent. Newer studies indicate that a lower calorie intake also keeps older rodents physiologically young, enabling them to retain the mobility of younger ones while registering a lower incidence of common old-age" diseases such as far-sightedness, cataracts, cancer and kidney dysfunction.



Given such findings, many scientists believe food restriction may hold the key to slowing the aging process and preventing disease – in humans. They say a dramatic link may exist between eating less and living longer.

But other experts back off from drawing parallels between lab results and the human condition. They say the link is tough to prove. “Until recently, gerontology research just hasn’t been a hot field of study because it takes so long,” says Dr. Jeffrey Blumberg, assistant director of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Nutrition Research Center on Aging. “No one wants to wait five to 10 years for the results of an experiment – let alone dedicate a lifetime to studying the effect of diet on the longevity of human subjects. In terms of time, effort and expense, it is prohibitive.”

Even so, the animal studies have convinced a variety of researchers that the connection between eating less and living longer is probable rather than possible. Dr. Roy Walford, a professor of pathology at the UCLA School of Medicine, says his work with food-restricted lab mice convinced him in the ‘70s that humans could positively affect their longevity and health by restricting their caloric intake. The labwork inspired his book, *The 120-Year Diet*.

“Based on all the research, there is a high probability that (food restriction) applies to human longevity,” Walford says. “Some people insist on having formal proof, but most modern medicine is based on high-probability rather than absolute proof.”

“The evidence from animal experiments is very solid and accepted,” adds Dr. Walter Mertz, director of the USDA’s Human Nutrition Research Center in Beltsville, Maryland. “But this does not mean we should all go out and starve ourselves.”

Walford warns that food restriction can be tricky because calorie-counting often leads to poor nutrition due to skipped meals and junk food snacks. Food restriction should not be interpreted to mean starvation, malnutrition or chronic dieting, researchers caution, but rather cutting caloric intake to a moderate level.

If humans were to follow the formula used on lab animals, a ‘restricted diet’ might mean cutting the daily intake from 2,500 calories to 1,500. Interestingly enough, caloric curtailment appears to be more important to longevity in lab rats than any particular mix of carbohydrates, protein and fat. Nonetheless, experts still recommend a low-fat diet for humans because cardiovascular disease is a leading killer of our species, while rats tend to die of other causes such as cancer or kidney disease.

Besides eating well on a restricted, “The most important thing is for people to maintain their ideal body weight,” asserts USDA’s Mertz.

Walford is less conservative. If you want to try a restricted diet, he maintains, you should find your set-point weight – the weight to which your body naturally gravitates – and gradually decrease your weight to 10 to 25 percent below that. For example, Walford says, he weighed 155 pounds between the ages of 20 to 50, and now he weighs 140.

“Obviously, the number of calories a person needs to drop will depend on body size and type,” he adds, “but most people will need from 1,500 to 2,000 calories a day.”

But life shouldn’t be a struggle against calories, warns researcher Blumberg, who cautions that if you’re considering diet restriction, quality of life should factor in the

decision more strongly than longevity. “Many of today’s popular dietary guidelines – the concept of eating light, for example – have been proven effective at increasing the quality of life and health,” he explains. “So, for some humans, we may have already found the optimum diet for longevity as well as quality. But most importantly, our eating habits allow us to live life more like light bulbs – burning brightly until we click off.

“In other words,” he concludes, “our goal should be to die young as late as possible.”

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