



**What's a Woman to Eat?
Do New Results from the Women's Health Initiative
Cast Doubt on the Benefits of Reduced-Fat Diets?**

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Headlines in major newspapers around the country have reported apparently discouraging results from the Women's Health Initiative (WHI), a major study that found that 8 years on a low-fat diet program did not reduce women's overall risks of heart attacks, strokes, breast cancer or colon cancer. Even so, there is no doubt that diet can have a significant impact on women's health, so how do we get to the bottom of the problem of finding the right combination of fats, carbohydrates, proteins, and other nutrients to eat?

Studying and understanding the impact of dietary modifications is always complicated. Consider the following:

- Any time we limit our intake of one type or category of food, we tend to fill the gap by eating more of another type of food. In the WHI, women were not encouraged to cut calories or lose weight.
- Our bodies have an astonishingly efficient "thermostat" that works hard all our lives to return us to whatever body

weight and body composition it has been set at, based on what has been normal for us over the long-term. That is why keeping weight off after just about any kind of crash diet is so hard to do.

More About the Women's Health Initiative Reduced-Fat Diet Study

The Women's Health Initiative is a massive, ongoing research effort that began in 1992, and has involved over 160,000 women in several studies. Its goals were to determine, among other things, how to lower the incidence of breast cancer, colon cancer, stroke and cardiovascular disease. They investigated whether low-fat diets could reduce the risk of developing these diseases.

The women participating in the low-fat diet study were divided into two groups: one group was encouraged to continue eating as they always had, while the other group was encouraged (through participation in a series of training sessions) to modify their diets to reduce fat and increase their consumption of fruits, vegetables, and grains. By comparing

the rates at which women in the two groups later developed health problems including breast and colon cancer and cardiovascular disease, scientists hoped to see whether the training sessions would work and whether the low-fat diet would improve women's health.

The reported results were not encouraging, since few differences emerged in the health status of the women in the two groups. However, there were a number of weaknesses in the study that made the results difficult to interpret.

- All dietary fat is not alike. For example, we know that saturated fats and trans-fats can have particularly negative health effects and that certain fats – like those found in walnuts or some fish oils – can actually be beneficial. Nevertheless, the study did not monitor which types of fats any of the women were eating.
- The diets that women in the two groups reported eating were not as different as scientists had hoped they would be. The low-fat group averaged 29% calories from fat instead of the targeted 20%. Their reported consumption of fruits and vegetables was only slightly raised, and their consumption of grains did not change. We can't be sure whether or not the incidence of cancer, stroke and cardiovascular disease in the two groups would have been different if the diets had been less similar.
- Women in the diet modification group whose total fat intake was reduced the most *did* significantly lower their risk for invasive breast cancer. And those who consumed less saturated fat and ate more fruits and vegetables reduced their blood pressure, cholesterol and other problems that may eventually reduce their risk of heart attack, stroke, and heart disease.

- There was no attempt to modify overall calorie intake or to lose weight in either group. Research clearly shows that being overweight increases the risk of breast cancer, heart disease, arthritis, and many other diseases, so more targeted dietary modifications that include emphasis on achieving and maintaining healthy body weight might be more effective.

- The study did not last long enough to tell for sure whether the two groups will have different rates of cancer or cardiovascular disease. While the 8 years that these women have been followed represents a big investment of time and money, we know that many cancers and other health conditions take 15-20 years to develop, showing up for the first time among older women. It is impossible to say whether even the modest dietary modification that was accomplished in this study will result in health benefits for these women over the next 10 or 20 years.

- There is no way to know whether the dietary intervention in this study would have been more effective if it had been started earlier in the women's lives – when the women were in their 20's or 30's, rather than at 50-79 years of age. If these women had started to reduce saturated- and trans-fats, in their diets and increase their consumption of fruits, vegetables, and grains when they were much younger, it might have made more of a difference in their later years.

What We Have Learned from the Study

Don't let the negative headlines fool you. Although the results of this study are not as clear cut nor as positive as scientists would

have hoped, they still provide some important information.

- Women whose fat intake was lowered the most had better health outcomes, so that reducing fat may improve health.
- One of the most important messages is that dietary changes are easier to talk about than to do something about. The 19,541 participants in the low-fat group probably started out with very good intentions about following the recommended diet, but that turned out to be impossible for many of them. Whether this is because of pressure to join the family for dessert, the endless temptation created by advertisements for foods that were not compatible with the diet, or other causes, it is important for us to take such real-world obstacles into account.
- Over the 8 years of the study, women in the group that had not been asked to modify their diets also reported reducing in their consumption of fats and increasing in fruits and vegetables in their diets. Is that because they were in a study asking questions about the food they eat? We don't know, but it suggests that women are willing to change their diets to improve their health.

Maintaining Moderation and Balance

So what's a woman to eat? Most people, under most circumstances, will benefit from a well-balanced diet that is low in saturated- and trans-fats, includes plenty of fresh fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, and moderate amounts of dairy products and meat protein. Helpful nutritional guidelines are available from the US Department of Agriculture at:

http://www.usda.gov/news/usdakids/food_pyr.html. General guidelines for healthy eating may need to be modified to accommodate specific health problems or disease risks. For example, someone with high cholesterol might need to reduce their total fat intake below the levels that are recommended for someone with normal cholesterol.

Don't forget to watch calories. The way to lose weight is to use up more calories than you consume. Because excess weight can cause or complicate so many health problems, reaching and maintaining a healthy body weight is really important.

Remember that serving size and portion size are not the same thing. *Serving size* is a standardized quantity of food that we use to measure nutrients. *Portion size* is the amount we pile on our plates. Keep in mind that one serving of cooked vegetables is usually about one-half cup (about a hand-full!) and a serving of meat is about the size of a deck of cards. This means that most people can fit in all those recommended servings every day while still reducing their total calorie intake and losing weight. But it also means that the portions you serve yourself may be much higher in calories than the serving size would be.

In summary, the best nutritional science available to us today confirms that in spite of recent newspaper headlines that may have suggested otherwise, reducing saturated fats as part of a lower calorie diet, and increasing fresh fruits, vegetables, and whole grains as part of that diet, is almost always a good thing to do, and never a dangerous one.

Original reports of the WHI findings on low-fat diet can be found in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, February 8, 2006 – Vol 295, No. 6, pages 629, 643, and 655.