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Vegan diet reverses diabetes symptoms, study finds

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By Maggie Fox, Health and Science Correspondent

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - People who ate a low-fat vegan diet, cutting out all meat and dairy, lowered their blood sugar more and lost more weight than people on a standard American Diabetes Association diet, researchers said on Thursday.

They lowered their cholesterol more and ended up with better kidney function, according to the report published in *Diabetes Care*, a journal published by the American Diabetes Association.

Participants said the vegan diet was easier to follow than most because they did not measure portions or count calories. Three of the vegan dieters dropped out of the study, compared to eight on the standard diet.

"I hope this study will rekindle interest in using diet changes first, rather than prescription drugs," Dr. Neal Barnard, president of the Physician's Committee for Responsible Medicine, which helped conduct the study, told a news conference.

An estimated 18 million Americans have type-2 diabetes, which results from a combination of genetics and poor eating and exercise habits. They run a high risk of heart disease, stroke, kidney failure, blindness and limb loss.

Barnard's team and colleagues at George Washington University, the University of Toronto and the University of North Carolina tested 99 people with type-2 diabetes, assigning them randomly to either a low-fat, low-sugar vegan diet or the standard American Diabetes Association diet.

After 22 weeks on the diet, 43 percent of those on the vegan diet and 26 percent of those on the standard diet were either able to stop taking some of their drugs such as insulin or glucose-control medications, or lowered the doses.

The vegan dieters lost 14 pounds (6.5 kg) on average while the diabetes association dieters lost 6.8 pounds (3.1 kg).

An important level of glucose control called a1c fell by 1.23 points in the vegan group and by 0.38 in the group on the standard diet.

DROPPING DRUGS

A1c gives a measure of how well-controlled blood sugar has been over the preceding three months.

In the dieters who did not change whatever cholesterol drugs they were on during the study, LDL or "bad" cholesterol fell by 21 percent in the vegan group and 10 percent in the standard diet group.

The vegan diet removed all animal products, including meat, fish and dairy. It was also low in added fat and in sugar.

The American Diabetes Association diet is more tailored, taking into account the patient's weight and cholesterol. Most patients on this diet cut calories significantly, and were told to eat sugary and starchy foods in moderation.

All 99 participants met weekly with advisers, who advised them on recipes, gave them tips for sticking to their respective diets, and offered encouragement.

"We have got a combination here that works successfully," said Dr. David Jenkins of the University of Toronto, who worked on the study. "The message that we so often get with diet is that it is no good because nobody follows it for very long."

Dr. Joshua Cohen, George Washington University associate professor of medicine, said everyone diagnosed with diabetes is told to start eating more carefully.

"That may be among the hardest things that any of us can do," Cohen told the news conference.

The vegan diet "is at least as good, if not better than traditional approaches," Cohen said.

Vance Warren, a 36-year-old retired police officer living in Washington, said he lowered his a1c from 10.4, considered uncontrolled diabetes, to 5.1, considered a healthy level, over 18 months. "My life is much better being 74 pounds (34 kg) lighter," Warren told the news conference.

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