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Remember to eat your fish now

By:

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Incorporating fish into the diet may cut the risk of dementia and Alzheimer's disease by nearly 50 percent, according to a study recently published by Dr. Ernst Schaefer of the Jean Mayer USDA Human Nutrition Research Center on Aging (HNRCA).

"Just like your mother said, eating fish is good for you," Dr. Schaefer said.

Founded in 1981 by then-Tufts President Jean Mayer in cooperation with then Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill, the center is located on Boston's Tufts Medical School campus and devoted to the study of human nutrition and aging.

Schaefer currently serves as director of the Lipid Metabolism Laboratory and

focuses his research on nutrition, genetics, aging, gender effects, lipoproteins, and cardiovascular disease risk.

In this study, he postulated that the docosahexaenoic acid (DHA), which is critical to infant development and accounts for much of the fat found in human breast milk, may be critical in maintaining neurocognitive functions in the aging brain.

DHA, also helpful in preventing cardiac death, can be found in vegetable oils, soybeans, walnuts, and wheat germ, with the highest concentration found in fatty fishes, or fishes found in primarily cold-water environments.

The study, which was published in November's issue of Archives of Neurology, followed some 899 participants, aged between 55 and 58, over a nine-year period, during which 99 developed dementia and 71 were diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease.

After controlling known risk factors for dementia such as age, gender, and homocysteine levels, Schaefer found that participants with the highest levels of DHA in their brains were 47 percent less likely to develop dementia and 39 percent less likely to develop Alzheimer's than the participants with comparatively lower levels.

Schaefer said that he has yet to perform a placebo-controlled randomized clinical test to determine conclusively that DHA can prevent dementia or even Alzheimer's, but his results have not come as a surprise, as DHA has long been viewed as one of the acids most critical to maintaining healthy brain function, vision, and reproduction.

Schaefer has worked at the nutrition center since it opened in 1982.

He said that the center, which, according to its Web site has received recognition because of the applicability

of research done there. "The research is relevant to people [today]," he said.

-Erin Baldassari

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