Yogurt May Lower Men's Colorectal Cancer Risk

Men who ate yogurt at least twice a week were 26% less likely to have polyps with the potential to become malignant.

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Eating yogurt at least twice weekly may lower men's risk of developing colorectal polyps, suggests a study published last week in the medical journal Gut.

Colorectal adenomas, or polyps, are small growths that occur on the epithelial lining of the colon and rectum. They are usually benign but can become malignant. Colorectal cancer, the second leading cause of cancer-related death in the United States, is expected to claim 51,020 lives in 2019 alone, according to the American Cancer Society.

Led by Xiaobin Zheng, MD, of the Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis, researchers examined the diets of 32,606 men and 55,743 women who had undergone at least one lower-bowel endoscopy, a nonsurgical procedure used to examine the digestive tract, between 1986 and 2012. They found that the risk for conventional polyps was reduced by a statistically significant (unlikely to have been driven by chance) 19% in men—but not women—who consumed a minimum of two servings of yogurt per week.

What's more, the risk for polyps with a "higher malignant potential" was reduced by a statistically significant 26%.

While yogurt is recommended by the federal Dietary Guidelines for Americans, Waqar Qureshi, MD, a gastroenterologist affiliated with the Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, emphasized to MedPage Today that the results of this study do not necessarily mean that eating yogurt will reduce one's likelihood of developing precancerous bowel growths.

"It's just possible that men who ate a lot of yogurt also had a very healthy lifestyle that avoided established risk factors for colon cancer," said Qureshi, who was not involved in the study.

But there are reasons to believe that yogurt may actively promote colorectal health. Zheng and his colleagues speculated that the link between frequent yogurt consumption and reduced risk for adenomas could be due to yogurt's well-documented ability to sustain beneficial gut bacteria populations or to its anti-inflammatory properties.

Why was the link apparent only in men? In their conclusion, the researchers offered a possible explanation. A healthy gut has a tight barrier, formed by its intestinal lining, that keeps undigested food, toxins and bacteria from entering the bloodstream. Men are more likely than women, however, to have gut permeability, so-called leaky gut, which can increase the risk of developing adenomas. The researchers wrote, “As male patients with adenoma present with increased gut permeability, yogurt may benefit more for men compared with women.”

The study results are supported by those of a similar one conducted in Italy in 2011, which also noted a statistically significant association between regular yogurt consumption in men and reduced incidence of colorectal cancer, reported MedPage Today.

To read the study in its entirety, click here.

To learn more about colorectal cancer, click here.

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