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(CBS/AP)

(WebMD) Eating a low-fat vegan diet may be better at managing type 2 diabetes than traditional diets, according to a new study.

Researchers found 43 percent of people with type 2 diabetes who followed a low-fat vegan diet for 22 weeks reduced their need to take medications to manage their disease compared with 26 percent of those who followed the diet recommended by the American Diabetes Association (ADA).

Fast Fact

Forty-three percent of those on the vegan diet reduced their need to take drugs to manage their diabetes compared with 26 percent of the ADA diet group.

In addition, participants who followed the vegan diet experienced greater reductions in cholesterol levels and weight loss than those on the other diet.

A vegan diet is plant-based and consists of vegetables, fruits, grains, and legumes and avoids animal products, such as meat and dairy.

People who are on a vegan diet are at risk for vitamin B12 deficiency, and so B12 vitamins were given to the participants on that diet.

"The diet appears remarkably effective, and all the side effects are good ones -- especially weight loss and lower cholesterol," says researcher Neal D. Barnard, MD, adjunct associate professor of medicine at the George Washington University, in a news release. "I hope this study will rekindle interest in using diet changes first, rather than prescription drugs."

Barnard is also president of the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, a nonprofit health organization that opposes animal research and advocates a vegan diet.

Vegan Vs. ADA Diet For Diabetes

In the study, published in the journal *Diabetes Care*, researchers compared the effects of following a low-fat vegan diet and the ADA diet on reducing the need for drugs to manage diabetes, kidney function, cholesterol levels, and weight loss in 99 adults with type 2 diabetes. Meals were not provided, but participants met a dietitian to come up with a diet plan and then met regularly each week for nutrition and cooking instruction.

Forty-nine of the participants followed a low-fat vegan diet consisting of about 10 percent of daily calories from fat, 15 percent protein, and 75 percent carbohydrates. They were asked to avoid animal products and added fats and instead favor foods like beans

and green vegetables, but portion sizes and total daily calories or food intake were unrestricted.

The other 50 participants followed the dietary guidelines recommended by the ADA, including 15-20 percent protein, 60-70 percent carbohydrates and monosaturated fats (such as olive oil), and less than 7 percent saturated fats (such as animal fats and butter). Total cholesterol was also limited to 200 milligrams or less per day.

Overweight participants in the ADA diet group were also advised to reduce daily calorie intake by 500-1,000 calories per day.

The results showed that both diets improved diabetes management and reduced unhealthy cholesterol levels, but some improvements were greater with the low-fat vegan diet.

For example:

- 43 percent of those on the vegan diet reduced their need to take drugs to manage their diabetes compared with 26 percent of the ADA diet group.
- Weight loss averaged more than 14 pounds in the vegan diet group vs. less than 7 pounds in the other group.
- LDL "bad" cholesterol dropped by an average of 21 percent in the vegan group compared with 11 percent in the ADA diet group who did not change their cholesterol drug use.
- Measures of blood sugar control also improved more significantly among those who followed the low-fat vegan diet than among those who followed the ADA diet and who did not change their diabetes drug use.

Researchers say the vegan diet represents a major change from current diabetes diets because there are no limits on calories, carbohydrates, and portions, which may make it easier for some people to follow. Talk to your doctor about what diet changes you might consider to help with diabetes or other medical conditions.

SOURCES: *Barnard, N. Diabetes Care, August 2006; vol 29: pp 1777-1783. News release,*