Small Amounts of Ultra-Processed Foods Can Raise Risk of Stroke and Cognitive Decline

Black adults who ate ultra-processed foods had a 15% increased chance of stroke.

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Despite adhering to plant-based diets, including the Mediterranean diet, the DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) diet or the MIND (Mediterranean-DASH Intervention for Neurodegenerative Delay) diet, people who consume ultra-processed foods have an increased risk of stroke and cognitive impairment, according to a new study published in Neurology.

All three diets emphasize increasing one's intake of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, beans and seeds, while also limiting one's consumption of sugar, red meat and ultra-processed foods, such as ready-to-eat meals, frozen pizza or prepackaged soups, according to CNN.

Ultra-processed foods contain ingredients "never or rarely used in kitchens or classes of additives whose function is to make the final product palatable or more appealing," according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. French fries, sodas, hot dogs, candies, doughnuts, and ice cream are some examples of ultra-processed foods.

These types of foods are often high in calories, added sugar and salt and low in fiber, which can increase one's risk of cardiometabolic health issues, obesity, type 2 diabetes, weight gain and high blood pressure.

For the study, researchers analyzed data from 30,000 participants made up of 50% Black and 50% white people.

After following the individuals for up to 20 years, researchers found that the risk of stroke was about 8% higher for people who included ultra-processed foods to their diet compared with those who minimized their intake of such foods.

For Black participants, the risk of stroke increased to 15%, which may be attributed to the impact of ultra-processed foods on high blood pressure in Black folks, according to study author and neurologist W. Taylor Kimberly, MD, PhD, chief of the division of neurocritical care at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston.

About 55% of Black adults have high blood pressure, and many develop the condition earlier in life, according to the American Heart Association. Uncontrolled high blood pressure can lead to stroke, heart failure, kidney disease and even death. What's more, Black people face higher rates of obesity and diabetes compared with other groups.

In an editorial published with the study, authors noted that low-nutrient foods spike blood sugars and can lead to elevated blood pressure, high cholesterol, type 2 diabetes and obesity. These conditions are all key risk factors for vascular disease in the heart and brain, note the authors.

These results support previous studies that have linked ultra-processed foods to adverse health conditions. Earlier this year, a review of 45 meta-analyses on nearly 10 million people found that eating 10% more ultra-processed foods was associated with a 16% higher risk of developing cognitive impairment.

Some experts suggest adding warning labels to the packaging of ultra-processed foods to deter consumers from buying unhealthy products.

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