Black Adventists Have Lower Cancer and Death Rates

Black members of the church are 22% less likely to develop cancer compared with the Black population overall.

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A new study published in the American Cancer Society's journal Cancer reveals that the healthy Seventh-day Adventist lifestyle is linked with reduced cancer risk—specifically, for Black Americans, according to a press release from the journal's publisher, Wiley. Until now, there has been little research on the effects of this lifestyle on cancer risk among Black Adventists.

Adventists, a Protestant denomination, are known for promoting nonsmoking, plant-based diets, regular exercise and maintaining a normal body weight. Many, but not all, are vegetarians. Previous research has shown that they are at lower risk for many cancers, heart disease and diabetes.

For this study, researchers compared death rates and cancer incidence between a national Seventh-day Adventist population and a representative sample of the U.S. population using data from the Adventist Health Study-2 and a U.S. Census population. Investigators adjusted for differences in age, sex, race, education, residence location and past smoking habits.

Compared with the general population, Adventists experienced a 33% lower rate of death from any cause and a 30% lower incidence of all cancers combined. Incidence rates for breast, colorectal, rectal and lung cancer were 30%, 16%, 50% and 30% lower, respectively.

Among Black Adventists, compared with Black individuals in the U.S. Census population, death rates and cancer incidence were also significantly lower—36% and 22%, respectively.

According to Gary Fraser, PhD, of Loma Linda University in California, the plant-based diet Adventists follow may factor into the many health benefits they experience. Adventist vegetarians are less likely to be overweight and less likely to have diabetes, hypertension, coronary heart disease and several cancers compared with Adventists who eat meat. But even those who eat meat tend to consume less animal foods than average Americans. Their rates of disease are higher than vegetarian Adventists but lower than average Americans.

"Thus, the findings in this report comparing all Adventists—vegetarians and nonvegetarians—to

average Americans...strongly suggest that these health advantages may be available to all Americans who choose similar diets, in addition, of course, to other well-known prudent lifestyle choices, such as regular physical activity, avoiding smoking and care with body weight," Fraser said.

For related coverage, read "Is Eating Red Meat Healthy––or Not?" and "Beyoncé and Jay-Z Advocate for Veganism."

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