Live Long, Age Well

How eating roughage can help

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In the 1985 movie Cocoon, old people regained their youthful vitality and were freed from diseases that often come with aging. Now, findings published in The Journals of Gerontology, Series A: Biological Sciences and Medical Sciences show that the carbohydrate fiber, an overlooked nutrient in our diet, may be the key to a longer, healthier life.

For the study, researchers reviewed data on the long-term risk factors for sensory loss and systemic diseases experienced by more than 1,600 adults age 50 years and older in the Blue Mountains Eye Study. Scientists measured the connection between the different nutritional factors related to carbohydrate intake (e.g., glycemic index, sugar intake) and how healthy participants were as they aged.

“Essentially, we found that those who had the highest intake of different types of fiber [a kind of mostly indigestible carbohydrate essential to how the body processes food] actually had an almost 80 percent greater likelihood of living a long and healthy life over a 10-year follow-up,” says Bamini Gopinath, PhD, the lead author of the study. “That is, they were less likely to suffer from hypertension, diabetes, dementia, depression and functional disability.”

Scientists caution that more research is needed before they issue dietary advice. But one thing you can do right now is to make sure you’re getting the currently recommended amount of fiber, which is 25 to 30 grams each day from food.

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