Mediterranean Diet May Lower Preeclampsia Risk in Black Women

The study examined the risk of preeclampsia in racially and ethnically diverse low-income women.

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A Mediterranean-style diet during pregnancy could lower the risk for preeclampsia, especially for Black women, who are at higher risk than their white peers.

Preeclampsia affects 5% to 10% of pregnant women worldwide and is characterized by extremely high blood pressure and liver or kidney damage and can be fatal to mother and child. Preeclampsia can more than double a woman's risk for long-term cardiovascular disease (heart failure, heart disease, chronic high blood pressure, stroke, etc.). Children of women with this disease are often born prematurely and are at higher risk of developing high blood pressure and heart disease.

A new study published in the Journal of the American Heart Association found that Black women who adhered to a Mediterranean-style diet saw the biggest reduction in their risk compared with their non-Black peers.

"Given these health hazards to both mothers and their children, it is important to identify modifiable factors to prevent the development of preeclampsia, especially among Black women, who are at the highest risk of this serious pregnancy complication," Anum Minhas, the chief cardiology fellow and a cardio-obstetrics and advanced imaging fellow at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, said in a news release.

Researchers collected and analyzed health and dietary data for 8,507 women who took part in the Boston Birth Cohort between 1998 and 2016. The women were 25 years old, on average, and were recruited from Boston Medical Center, which serves a low-income, under-resourced racial and ethnic population. Of the cohort, nearly half the women were Black, 28% were Latina and the rest were white or unspecified race. About 10% (848) of the participants developed preeclampsia.

The Mediterranean-style diet consists largely of vegetables, fruits, legumes, olive oil, fish, whole grains and nuts. Researchers chose to study this diet because it has already been shown to reduce the risk for heart disease in adults.

Overall, the women who adhered to this diet during pregnancy had more than 20% lower odds of developing preeclampsia. Black women saw the most benefits compared with others in the study.

Researchers also found that women who had heart-related risk factors prior to pregnancy were much more susceptible to preeclampsia. Similarly, women with diabetes and obesity before pregnancy were twice as likely to develop preeclampsia, and women with high blood pressure were nine times more likely.

"Eating healthy foods regularly, including vegetables, fruits and legumes, is especially important for women during pregnancy. Their health during pregnancy affects their future cardiovascular health and also impacts their baby's health," Minhas said.

To learn more about high blood pressure during pregnancy, click here.

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