

Raw Food Vegans Thin but Healthy, Study Finds

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WASHINGTON - People on strict raw food vegetarian diets are thin but healthy, U.S. researchers reported Monday.

Although nutritionists and the food industry have warned that a diet without dairy foods can lead to the bone-thinning disease osteoporosis, the team at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis found the vegans they studied had many of the signs of strong bones.

Dr. Luigi Fontana, who led the study, said they had thin bones but none of the other signs of osteoporosis.

"We think it's possible these people don't have increased risk of fracture but that their low bone mass is related to the fact that they are lighter because they take in fewer calories," Fontana said in a statement.

He said he would continue to follow them to see if they develop osteoporosis later.

"Raw food vegetarians believe in eating only plant-derived foods that have not been cooked, processed, or otherwise altered from their natural state," Fontana's team wrote in this week's issue of the Archives of Internal Medicine.

"Because of their low calorie and low protein intake, raw food vegetarians have a low body mass index (BMI) and a low total body fat content. It is well documented that a low BMI and weight loss are strongly associated with low bone mass and increased fracture risk, while obesity protects against osteoporosis."

Fontana's team studied 18 strict raw food vegans aged 33 to 85. All ate a diet that included unprepared foods such vegetables, fruits, nuts and sprouted grains. They had been on this diet for an average of 3.6 years.

The team compared them to 18 more average Americans. The raw food group had an average body mass index of 20.5, while the average group was slightly overweight with a BMI of 25.

BMI is an internationally accepted measurement of height to weight, and a BMI of 18.5 to 24 is considered the healthy range.

Fontana expected the vegans to have low vitamin D levels because they avoid dairy products, which are fortified with the vitamin. But in fact their vitamin D levels were "markedly higher" than average.

Vitamin D is made by the skin when the body is exposed to sunlight and is key to keeping strong bones.

"These people are clever enough to expose themselves to sunlight to increase their concentrations of vitamin D," Fontana said.

And the vegans had low levels of C-reactive protein, an inflammatory molecule that is becoming linked with the risk of heart disease, diabetes and other chronic disease.

Furthermore, they had lower levels of IGF-1, a growth factor linked to risk of breast and prostate cancer.

Fontana does not advocate a raw food diet. But he said that to lower the risk of cancer and heart disease people should eat more fruits, vegetables and whole grains.