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News

Study of Alaska Natives confirms salmon-rich diet prevents diabetes, heart disease

Doug O'Harra | Mar 29, 2011



A diet of Alaska salmon rich in Omega-3 fatty acids appears to protect Yup'ik people from diabetes and heart disease -- even when the individuals in question have become obese, according to a recent study that examined eating habits and health in the Yukon Kuskokwim Delta region.

Scientists found that [Yup'ik people](#) in general consume about 20 times more of the complex fish oils every year than do people in the Lower 48 states, a subsistence-driven cuisine that may actually shield them from many health problems blamed on obesity, junk food and inactivity.

Y-K residents show similar levels of [obesity](#) as the overall U.S. population, yet experience far lower prevalence of the [adult-onset diabetes](#) linked to poor diet and weight issues -- about 3.3 percent versus about 7.7 percent.

The findings underscore what Alaska nutritionists and Native health experts have long argued: Eating wild Alaska salmon along with other traditional foods is uniquely healthy and trumps outdated, often misunderstood dietary recommendations that people should limit their intake of fish.

In this instance, "it appeared that high intakes of [Omega-3-rich seafood](#) protected Yup'ik Eskimos from some of the harmful effects of obesity," said Zeina Makhoul, Ph.D., a postdoctoral researcher in the Cancer Prevention Program of the Public Health Sciences Division at the Hutchinson Center, [in a](#)

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"While genetic, lifestyle and dietary factors may account for this difference, it is reasonable to ask, based on our findings, whether the lower prevalence of diabetes in this population might be attributed, at least in part, to their high consumption of Omega-3-rich fish."

Alaska Native village elders supported diet studies

The study, [published March 23 in the European Journal of Clinical Nutrition](#), took some of the data gathered over the past decade by the [Center for Alaska Native Health Research](#) and performed a new analysis led by researchers at the [Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center](#). Makhoul, the lead author, was one of 11 collaborators from Fairbanks, Seattle and Davis, Calif.

Scientists at the Native health center at the University of Alaska Fairbanks began working closely with Yup'ik leaders in the early 2000s in a federally funded investigation of the relationships among traditional diet, obesity and diabetes.

With the support and consultation of village elders, the scientists tested and interviewed 1,003 adults and teenagers spread among 10 southwest Alaska communities between 2003 and 2006 in pursuit of a public health mystery: How were certain people who ate the high-fat diets of traditional subsistence foods able to remain so healthy despite being overweight?



Is Alaska's economy

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"What we've found is that the prevalence of obesity among Yup'ik Eskimos is no different than other people. It's no different than Caucasians living a very Western lifestyle," center co-director Bert Boyer told the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner in 2007 in a story about [early results](#).

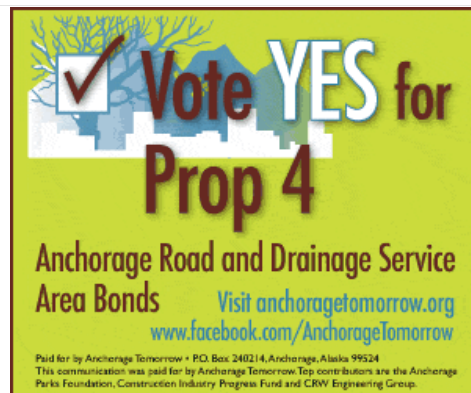
"But the intriguing part, and the exciting part, is that the prevalence of Type II diabetes in Yup'ik Eskimos is very low. That really piqued our curiosity."

That kind of diabetes typically strikes adults as a result of poor diet and weight gain over many years, and is thought to be just one consequence of an obesity epidemic triggering devastating health problems across the country.

"It turns out Yup'ik Eskimos have among the lowest levels of metabolic syndrome (or risk of obesity-related diseases such as diabetes) of any group worldwide, yet they are as overweight as anyone else in America," Boyer told the News-Miner.

Something was different, and it didn't appear to be genetics.

"We think the uniqueness comes from the food they eat," Boyer said at the time.



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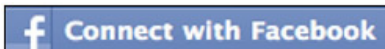
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