

HEALTH | TAKE A NUMBER

Cardiovascular Deaths Linked to Poor Dietary Choices

By STEPH YIN MARCH 13, 2017

Cardiovascular disease claims **610,000** lives in the United States each year. It is the leading cause of mortality nationwide, accounting for one in every four deaths.

A new analysis, funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, shows that a substantial portion of these deaths could be prevented by healthier eating.

In 2015, more than 400,000 deaths from cardiovascular causes were linked to unhealthy diets, according to the research, presented at a meeting of the American Heart Association last week in Portland, Ore.

The biggest factors were a deficit of nuts and seeds, vegetables, whole grains and fruits, and an excess of salt. Diets low in omega-3 fatty acids, found in seafood, and high in trans-fat, processed meat or sugary beverages also played a role.

“Internationally and nationally, the focus is on the consumption of unhealthy foods, like sugar-sweetened beverages,” said Ashkan Afshin, an acting assistant professor at the University of Washington’s Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation and co-author of the study.

“But when it comes to the burden of disease,” he added, “some of the leading risk factors are not high intake of unhealthy foods, but low intake of healthy foods.”

The results suggest that an integrated approach to healthy eating is possible, said Linda Van Horn, a spokeswoman for the American Heart Association and a professor of preventive medicine at Northwestern University, who was not involved in the study.

“Typically, the higher the diet is in natural — not processed — plant-based foods, the lower the sodium intake is,” she said. “So by eating more of the favored foods, the detrimental intakes of sodium, as well as trans-fat and saturated fat and sugar, are lower.”

Low-quality diets contributed to the deaths of 222,100 men and 193,400 women, the new study estimated. Men’s higher consumption of sodium is one driver of this difference, Dr. Afshin said. Over all, the results of the study were consistent with global patterns.

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