

High-protein diets best avoided

6 March 2014

The news is not good when it comes to trendy high-protein, low-carbohydrate diets with two new studies finding they lead to a shorter lifespan and poor cardiometabolic health, and even an increased risk of cancer and diabetes.

The studies, one from Australia (Solon-Biet, McMahon, et al) and the other from the US (Levine, Suarez, et al), present a damning picture of the popular high-protein movement with the latter suggesting excessive animal protein “is nearly as bad as smoking”, and both agreeing that a low-protein intake may be the key to longevity.

Yet, in the weight-loss stakes, the high-protein diet looks to be the best bet despite its inherent health risks.

The Sydney study, led by Professor Steve Simpson from Sydney University analysed hundreds of mice on 25 different diets while examining the effects of protein, fat and carbohydrate on energy intake, metabolic health, ageing and longevity.

They found a high-protein, low-carbohydrate diet resulted in reduced food intake and body fat, but it also led to a shorter lifespan and poor cardiometabolic health. A low-protein, high-fat diet had the most detrimental effects, and a high-carbohydrate, low-protein diet was best for longevity despite increasing body fat.

The researchers also found that, contrary to popular opinion, calorie restriction had no beneficial effect on lifespan.

“The advice we are always given is to eat a healthy balanced diet, but what does that mean?” said co-author Professor David Le Couteur. “This research represents an important step in finding out.”

The investigators predict that a diet with moderate amounts of high-quality protein that is also relatively low in fat and high in complex carbohydrates will yield the best metabolic health and the longest life.

But the National Director of Cardiovascular Health at the Heart Foundation, Dr Robert Grenfell said the Heart Foundation - a vocal proponent of a Mediterranean-style diet - does not support the consumption of a low-fat diet or replacing saturated fat with carbohydrates for heart health.

“There is international scientific consensus that replacing saturated fat with ‘good’ unsaturated fat, in particular polyunsaturated fat, reduces your risk of heart disease,” he told *6minutes*.