

New study aims to encourage healthier diet among Asian women

300 women here will take part in effort to assess benefits of tailored Mediterranean diet

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While the Mediterranean diet is widely recognised as healthy by global health organisations, an upcoming study will look into which parts of the diet are beneficial to women in Singapore.

The new study aims to encourage Asian women to adopt healthier diet choices through the consumption of a tailored Mediterranean diet, and will be conducted with 300 Asian women of reproductive age living in Singapore.

A Mediterranean diet emphasises whole grains over refined carbohydrates and fish over red meat and processed meat, as well as plant-based proteins like legumes and plant-based fats such as walnuts and almonds.

Research has shown that it is effective in preventing cardiovascular diseases and reducing risk factors such as high blood pressure and high cholesterol.

The study is one of the ongoing collaborative efforts led by the Global Centre for Asian Women's Health at the National University of Singapore's Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine (GloWNUS), in partner-

ship with Universite Paris Cite's (UPCite) Faculty of Health, on research and education programmes on women's health concerns across their lifespan, with a focus on Asians.

When designing the new study, the research team drew insights from earlier studies by GloWNUS.

One such study, which was published in the journal *Nature Food* in July, found that pregnant women in the US who followed healthier diets like the Mediterranean diet had higher exposure to harmful chemicals called persistent organic pollutants (POPs).

Some POPs are chemicals that can disrupt hormones, and others are metals.

This was due mainly to the consumption of certain types of fish, which is a significant component of the Mediterranean diet.

These pollutants can come from plastic packaging that the foods are wrapped in, or from microplastics in the ocean. The amount and type of pollutants in food varies depending on its origin, said Professor Zhang Cuilin, director of GloWNUS.

However, the amount of pollutants in the foods found in such

diets is still considered rather low and within the acceptable range that is safe for consumption, she added.

"If you can control the level of chemicals (by choosing foods with lower amounts of pollutants), then the Mediterranean diet can be even healthier... the nutritional benefits of the Mediterranean diet can actually alleviate the harmful impact from chemicals," she said.

The research team also considered a previous GloWNUS study, published in the *Diabetes Care* journal on Oct 9, which found that pregnant women in the US who consumed a healthy Mediterranean diet but had low exposure to pollutants had the lowest risk of gestational diabetes.

Prof Zhang said that while results from previous studies conducted by researchers in the US could be relevant to Asian populations, the extent of their impact may vary.

"We know that genetically, Asians are different from the Caucasian population in terms of genetic susceptibility to Type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease, so lifestyle and environmental factors unique to the Asian population may modify or interact with genetics, and this is why we need to do this study for the Asian population in particular – to give a more precise recommendation (of the Mediterranean diet) to Asian women," she added.

While the upcoming study is still in its planning stages, the research team is working with various partners to encourage Asian women to adopt healthier diet choices through the consumption of a tailored Asian diet based on Mediterranean diet principles, by looking into what makes it more acceptable, accessible and affordable for women in Singapore, said Prof Zhang, who was the principal investigator of all three studies.

Commending the ongoing collaboration between the two institutions at the Women's Health Conference 2024, held from Oct 24 to 26 at the Sands Expo and Convention Centre, Minister of State for Health and Digital Development and Information Rahayu Mahzam said on Oct 25: "These collaborative efforts between GloWNUS and UPCite exemplify the importance of international partnerships in advancing women's health and pave the way for innovative and culturally tailored interventions to enhance the well-being of women globally."

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