

Inflammatory diets and depression in older adults living in Italy

There is an increasing amount of evidence that higher inflammatory levels in the body are associated with more depressive symptoms. The inflammation levels are caused by lifestyle factors such as smoking, lack of physical activity and chronic diseases like overweight, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease. In addition, an unhealthy diet (high-sugar and high-fat snacks, sugar-sweetened beverages, processed meat and fast foods) might increase the risk of depression and higher inflammation levels in the body. Especially older adults have higher inflammation levels in their body, although it is not clear whether this is caused by lifestyle factors or chronic diseases. Moreover older adults suffer more from depression. That is why we thought it would be interesting to find out whether diets, that are associated with higher inflammation levels, increase depressive symptoms in older adults. We expect to find that unhealthy diets, which are associated with higher inflammation, increase depression.

We identified two so-called 'inflammatory diets' of which the first diet consisted of refined grains, pasta, pasta sauce, sweet snacks and rice. We found no association between higher consumption of this diet and depression over 9 years. We don't know exactly why we did not find an association but a possible explanation could be that the diet of older adults is quite similar and therefore it is difficult to make a distinction between people and to find an association. The second diet consisted of pasta, pasta sauce, sugar-sweetened beverages, processed meat, chocolate and alcoholic drinks. Higher consumption of this diet was associated with a decrease in depression over a period of 9 years. This remarkable finding might be explained by the fact that older adults with depression tend to eat less and consequently do not get enough energy from food, which in turn could be a sign of declining health. So it seems that a sufficient amount of energy is an important aspect in addition to the quality of the diet in this specific group.