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A diet high in protein, particularly animal protein, may help elderly individuals function at higher levels physically, psychologically, and socially, according to a study published in the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society

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Due to increasing life expectancies in many countries, increasing numbers of elderly people are living with functional decline, such as declines in cognitive ability and activities of daily living. Functional decline can have profound effects on health and the economy.

Research suggests that aging may reduce the body's ability to absorb or process proteins, which could mean that protein requirements increase with age. Megumi Tsubota-Utsugi, PhD, MPH, RD, of the National Institute of Health and Nutrition in Japan, and her colleagues in Tohoku University and Teikyo University, Japan, wondered whether protein intake might affect the functional capabilities of the elderly. They

designed a study to investigate the relationship between protein intake and future decline in higher-level functional capacity in older community-dwelling adults in the Japanese general population. Their analysis included 1,007 individuals with an average age of 67.4 years who completed food questionnaires at the start of the study and seven years later. Participants were divided into quartiles according to intake levels of total, animal, and plant protein. Tests of higher-level functional capacity included social and intellectual aspects as well as measures related to activities of daily living.

Men in the highest quartile of animal protein intake had a 39 percent decreased odds of experiencing higher-level functional decline than those in the lowest quartile. These associations were not seen in women. No consistent association was observed between plant protein intake and future higher-level functional decline in either sex.

“Identifying nutritional factors that contribute to maintaining higher-level functional capacity is important for prevention of future deterioration of activities of daily living,” said Dr. Tsubota-Utsugi. “Along with other modifiable health behaviors, keeping higher protein intake could contribute to maintain elderly functional capacity.”

Access the full study on the Wiley Press Room here. (To access PDFs and embargoed stories you must be logged in to the Press Room before clicking the link. Request a login here.)

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About the Author:

To arrange an interview with with Dr. Tsubota-Utsugi, please contact her at mutsugky@nih.go.jp

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About the Journal:

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