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Omega-3 fatty acids may slow very early Alzheimer's

REUTERS HEALTH INFORMATION

Oct 11 (Reuters Health) - Dietary supplementation with omega-3 fatty acids for 6 months appears to be of little benefit in patients with mild to moderate Alzheimer's disease (AD), according to results of a study conducted in Sweden.

However, a second look at the data suggests that omego-3 fatty acids may protect cognitive function in patients with very mild, early stage AD.

Studies have shown that a diet rich in omega-3 fatty acids, as found in fish oil, reduces the risk of AD. Furthermore, animal studies have shown that the two predominant omega-3 fatty acids in fish oil, eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA), preserve cognitive function.

To evaluate the effect of DHA/EPA on patients already diagnosed with AD, investigators led by Dr. Jan Palmblad, from Karolinska University Hospital Huddinge in Stockholm, randomly recruited 174 patients with mild to moderate AD.

Eighty-nine patients were assigned 430 mg DHA plus 150 mg EPA, administered four times daily, and 85 were assigned placebo for 6 months during blinded portion of the trial. For the next 6 months, both groups were given the DHA/EPA supplement.

As demonstrated by Mini-Mental State Examination (MMSE) scores and the modified cognitive portion of the Alzheimer Disease Assessment Scale (ADAS-COG), the two treatment groups did not differ significantly at 6 months or at 12 months.

But when Palmblad's group conducted a post-hoc analysis of the 32 patients with very mild AD at baseline, those first treated with placebo exhibited a significant decline in MMSE score at 6 months, whereas scores remained stable in those treated with DHA/EPA.

The researchers say their results, coupled with other studies, "support the idea that omega-3 fatty acids have a role in primary prevention of AD but not in treatment of manifest disease," when the "neuropathologic involvement is too advanced to be substantially attenuated by anti-inflammatory treatment."

SOURCE: Archives of Neurology October 2006.