

In 2008 WAIMR celebrates 10 years since its inception and the many internationally-important discoveries which have transformed it into WA's premier adult medical research institute.



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Media Statement

MEN URGED TO PICK FRUIT FOR IRON PROTECTION

Men are being urged to pick up at least two pieces of fruit each day to protect their bodies against iron overload, which can lead to a range of health problems including fatigue, arthritis and liver cancer.

For the first time, researchers have identified a dietary factor that reduces body iron stores in men, which could help treat those with hemochromatosis, the most common genetic disease among Anglo-Celtic Australians that triggers the body to absorb more iron than usual from food.

The study conducted by a group of Australian researchers, including Professors John Olynyk and David Ravine from the Western Australian Institute for Medical Research, found consumption of two or more pieces of non-citrus fruit in a day could reduce iron levels by 20 per cent in men.

“We found that men who ate at least two pieces of non-citrus fruit had reduced iron stores compared with those who ate one or less pieces, so I'd encourage all men to include a few pieces of non-citrus fruit in their daily diet to help protect against iron overload,” Professor Olynyk said.

“Iron levels are largely dictated by genetics, so this is good news for men with hereditary hemochromatosis, which is extremely common, as well as those at risk of iron overload from other causes, because it means we've discovered a modifiable tool to help treat the condition.”

Professor Olynyk said most people with hemochromatosis didn't even know it, but screening was as simple as a blood test that a GP can arrange.

Hemochromatosis is caused by two genetic mutations of the HFE gene and one in every 200 Caucasians will have it, but men with the disease are 30 times more likely to develop complications than women – which can include arthritis, liver cancer and liver disease.

“Based on this study, I would urge men with an iron overload disease to increase non-citrus fruits and reduce red meat and alcohol in their diets,” Professor Olynyk said.

“We believe fruit may not just be useful for iron reduction, it could also help protect cells against oxidation and reduce inflammation, easing pressure on internal organs that iron overload can cause.”

Professor Ravine said the findings supported the long-held community view that ‘an apple a day keeps the doctor away’.

The research, using data from the Busselton Health Study, found only non-citrus fruit reduced iron stores in men, the same phenomenon was not seen in women or for citrus fruit.

“A reduction in iron levels from non-citrus fruit consumption was probably not seen in women because women don't store iron in the body at the same quantity as men, so it's unlikely we'd see a change in low storage levels,” Professor Olynyk said.

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“Citrus fruit is commonly thought to increase iron uptake, but this study found no such effect in men or women and vitamin C supplements weren’t seen to affect iron status either.”

The study published in *Mayo Clinic Proceedings* in May 2008, also found red meat increased iron levels; potatoes, other cooked vegetables and salads had no effect; and egg yolk, coffee and tea inhibited iron uptake.

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