

The Mediterranean diet, which has earned [top honors as best diet for years](#), has an impressive list of science behind it. Studies have found this way of eating can prevent cognitive decline, but also help the heart, reduce diabetes, prevent bone loss, encourage weight loss and more.

Inside the MIND diet

The MIND diet was developed in 2015 by Rush researchers interested in taking the Mediterranean diet to the next level by focusing it on brain health. Instead of providing a blanket statement — eat more vegetables and fruits — as the Mediterranean diet does, the MIND diet recommends specific amounts of known brain-healthy foods, Agarwal said.

For example, leafy greens, the darker the better, should be eaten every day of the week on the MIND diet. Those include arugula, collards, dandelion greens, endive, grape leaves, kale, mustard greens, romaine lettuce, spinach, Swiss chard and turnip greens.

Berries are also stressed over other fruits on the MIND diet. Blackberries, blueberries, raspberries or strawberries should be eaten at least five days a week.

A [2017 study](#) of nearly 6,000 healthy older Americans with an average age of 68 found those who followed the Mediterranean or MIND diet lowered their risk of dementia by one-third.

Most benefit found in leafy greens

The study, [published Wednesday in the journal Neurology](#), examined the brains of 581 people who each donated their body as part of the [Memory and Aging Project](#) at Rush University. The project, which began in 1997, has been collecting yearly diet information on participants since 2004, Agarwal said.

The current study analyzed diet data from 2014, for an average of six to seven years, and then compared that information with the number of plaques and tangles in each person's brain at autopsy.

Looking at brain tissue to determine the specific level of dementia markers was a unique part of the study, Agarwal said: "Previous studies with dementia risk were more on the clinical outcome — cognitive performance over time — but our study is actually looking at the specific hallmarks of disease in the brain after death."

People who ate greater amounts of pastries, sweets, and fried and fast foods had much higher levels of plaques and tangles in their brain tissue, the study found.

Which food was the most helpful in reducing buildup? Green leafy vegetables, which are packed with bioactives, chemicals in foods that reduce inflammation and promote health. Examples of bioactive compounds include vitamins, minerals, [flavonoids](#) ([antioxidants](#)) and carotenoids (pigments in the skin of vegetables).

The brain tissue of people who ate the most leafy greens looked nearly 19 years younger in plaque buildup when compared with those who ate one or fewer servings per week, a statement on the study said.

“The combination of different nutrients and bioactives in green leafy vegetables make them unique,” Agarwal said. “They are very rich in many bioactives, flavonoids and lutein, which is important for brain health.”

There are different hypothesis on why lutein might be helping with the overall integrity of the brain,” she added, “such as reducing oxidative stress and inflammation.”

The most impressive impact of the diets was on beta-amyloid buildup, not tangles, and “the inverse association with beta-amyloid load was stronger for the Mediterranean diet than for the MIND diet,” the study said.

There was some reduction in tau tangles, the other key marker of Alzheimer’s, but it was not as robust as that for amyloid, Agarwal said. However, Agarwai and her team conducted [another study](#) that found that eating berries, a key part of the MIND diet, was helpful in reducing tangles in the brain.

“We still need to really tease apart what exactly is happening,” she said. “But overall, these diets are rich in the essential nutrients and bioactives which reduce overall inflammation and oxidative stress in the brain and probably leading up to less accumulation of amyloid plaques and tangles.”