

# What we aren't eating is killing us, global study finds

By Sandee LaMotte, CNN

Which risk factor is responsible for more deaths around the world than any other? Not smoking. Not even high blood pressure. **It's a poor diet.**

"In many countries, poor diet now causes more deaths than tobacco smoking and high blood pressure," said Ashkan Afshin, an assistant professor at the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington.

Drinking two or more diet beverages a day linked to high risk of stroke, heart attacks. And it's not just that people are choosing unhealthy options such as red meat and sugary sodas. Just as critical, said Afshin, the lead author of a 27-year global diet analysis published Wednesday in the journal the Lancet, is the **lack of healthy foods in our diets**, along with high levels of salt.

"While traditionally all the conversation about healthy diet has been focused on lowering the intake of unhealthy food, in this study, we have shown that, at the population level, a low **intake of healthy foods is the more important factor**, rather than the high intake of unhealthy foods," he said.

One in five deaths globally -- that's about 11 million people -- in 2017 occurred because of too much sodium and a lack of whole grains, fruit and nuts and seeds, the study found, rather than from diets packed with trans fats, sugar-sweetened drinks and high levels of red and processed meats.

## 15 dietary risk factors

In the analysis, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Afshin and his colleagues looked at 15 dietary risk factors and their impact on death and disability. High levels of unhealthy red and processed meats, sugar-sweetened beverages, trans fatty acids and salt -- all known to be health risks -- were compared with the effects of a diet low in many healthy foods. Those healthy items included fruits, vegetables, whole grains, milk, calcium, nuts and seeds, fiber, legumes or beans, omega-3 fatty acids from seafood, and polyunsaturated fats, the good-for-you fats found in salmon, vegetable oils and some nuts and seeds.

Except salt, which was a key risk factor in most countries, the study found red and processed meats, trans fats and sugary drinks toward the bottom of the risk chart for most countries. In fact, more than half of all global diet-related deaths in 2017 were due to just three risk factors: **eating too much salt, not enough whole grains and not enough fruit**. Those risks held true regardless of socioeconomic level of most nations, Afshin said.

The new study is part of the yearly Global Burden of Disease report, prepared by a consortium of thousands of researchers that tracks premature death and disability from more than 350 diseases and injuries in 195 countries.

In January, the consortium released its "diet for a healthy planet," which said that cutting red meat and sugar consumption in half and upping intake of fruits, vegetables and nuts could prevent up to 11.6 million premature deaths without harming the planet.

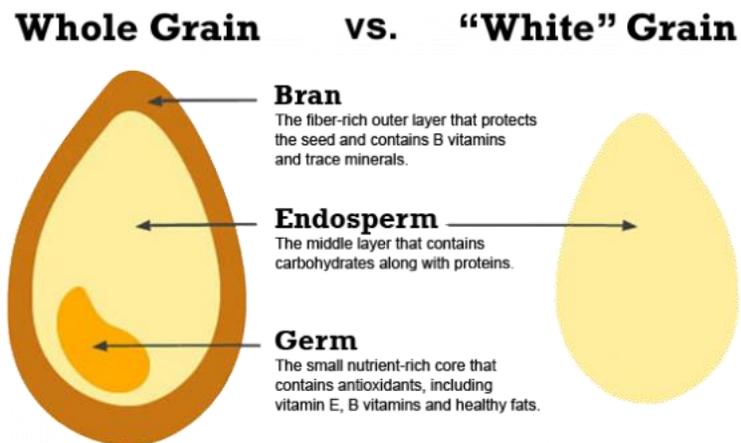
## Highest risk factors

For the United States, India, Brazil, Pakistan, Nigeria, Russia, Egypt, Germany, Iran and Turkey, a lack of whole grains was the greatest risk factor; for many more countries, that came in second or third. That doesn't mean people in these countries ate no grains but rather that they ate processed grains, with little nutritional value and the potential for high calorie counts.

Reynolds, who published a study in *The Lancet* on the effect of whole grains this year, cautions that many of the products **sold to consumers today as "whole grain" often aren't.**

"Whole grains are being included in ultraprocessed products that may be finely milled down and have added sodium, added free sugars and added saturated fats," Reynolds said. "I think we all need to be aware of this and not confuse the benefits from the more intact, minimally processed whole grains with what is often advertised as whole-grain products available today."

A whole grain is defined as the use of the entire seed of a plant: the bran, the germ and the endosperm. The Whole Grains Council provides a stamp, available in 54 countries, that consumers can look for that certifies the degree of whole grains in the product.



"Unhealthy diet is the top risk factor for the Global Burden of Disease. The relative importance of this factor has been growing and requires urgent attention," said Francesco Branca, director of the Department of Nutrition for Health and Development at the World Health Organization.

"The public needs to be aware of the critical links between diet and health and demand public action

to improve the access and availability of foods that contribute to healthy diets," Branca said.

"Considering the need for urgent action the **UN General Assembly has declared 2016-2025 the UN Decade of Action of Nutrition, and is asking governments to make such commitments.**"

That is going to require a coordinated effort between public policymakers, food growers, marketers and distributors, which will be a significant feat, Hawkes said. Getting back to whole grains, for example, is going to require a complete change in the economics of food production and distribution, she said.

"Refining grains is highly profitable," Hawkes said. "Take corn, for example. You can refine it into different ingredients: animal feed, refined flours and high-fructose corn syrup to name three. So manufacturers are generating multiple value streams from this refining process.

"If we then say, 'I'm producing corn to make one product,' then we need to have dialogues with the industry to ask about where public investment is needed and how we can shift the system, because it's going to be a big deal. It's a big, big shift." But Hawkes is hopeful. Twenty years ago, she said, when she entered a room of global health policymakers and mentioned the importance of diet, she was seen as "sort of a fringe person. Now, when I enter a room and say that, it's taken seriously."