Drastic diet may extend human life, study finds

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Eating little may help people live longer, a study has found, ofÂ-ferÂ-ing supÂ-port for an idea that has tanÂ-taÂ-lized sciÂ-enÂ-tists for decÂ-ades.ReÂ-searchÂ-ers have long known that cutÂ-ting anÂ-iÂ-malsâ€™ food supply to near-starvaÂ-tÂ-ion levÂ-els gives themâ€”for reaÂ-sons still unÂ-clearâ€”longÂ-er lives and healthÂ-iÂ-er old age. StudÂ-ies have found that in huÂ-mans, too, sharply reÂ-duced eatÂ-ing is asÂ-soÂ-ciÂ-atÂ-ed with healthÂ-iÂ-er agÂ-ing, as long as nuÂ-triÂ-tionÂ-al baÂ-lance is mainÂ-tained.

But whethÂ-er this pracÂ-tice could acÂ-tuÂ-ally lengthÂ-en our lives has reÂ-mained unÂ-cerÂ-tain. Some sciÂ-enÂ-tists have arÂ-gued that itâ€™s doubtÂ-ful, beÂ-cause huÂ-mans alÂ-ready live unÂ-usuÂ-ally long. Only one small past study in huÂ-mans ofÂ-fered weak evÂ-iÂ-dence that peoÂ-ple eatÂ-ing less lived longÂ-er, acÂ-cordÂ-ing to its auÂ-thors, who were alÂ-so inÂ-volved in the new reÂ-search.The new study is the first to probe the claim by comÂ-parÂ-ing huÂ-man populaÂ-tÂ-ions, wrote the AmerÂ-iÂ-can and JapÂ-aÂ-nese sciÂ-enÂ-tists in a reÂ-port on their findÂ-ings.MoreÂ-oÂ-ver, they added, itâ€™s â€œthe first study that has shown exÂ-tendÂ-ed avÂ-erÂ-age and maxÂ-iÂ-mum life span in a huÂ-man populaÂ-tÂ-ion that is poÂ-tenÂ-tially due toâ€• reÂ-duced eatÂ-ing. The pracÂ-tice is known as caÂ-lorÂ-ic reÂ-stricÂ-tion. The reÂ-searchÂ-ers studÂ-ied resÂ-iÂ-dents of the JapÂ-aÂ-nese isÂ-land of OkÂ-iÂ-nawa, known through much of the last centÂ-ury both for exÂ-cepÂ-tionÂ-ally long-lived inÂ-habÂ-iÂ-tants and for very spare, though balÂ-anced diÂ-etÂ-s. The inÂ-vestÂ-iÂ-gatÂ-ors said they found evÂ-iÂ-dence that the two things are at least parÂ-tially reÂ-latÂ-ed.AlÂ-though that conÂ-cluÂ-sion might seem obÂ-viÂ-ous to someâ€”given the past reÂ-searchâ€”the sciÂ-enÂ-tists wrote that to reach it, they had to acÂ-count for some facÂ-tors that had hamÂ-pered sysÂ-temÂ-atÂ-ic analÂ-yÂ-sis. For one, OkiÂ-naÂ-wan diÂ-ets have changed, beÂ-comÂ-ing richer since about the end of the 1960s. AlÂ-so, it wasÂ-nâ€™t clear how to best asÂ-sess hisÂ-torÂ-iÂ-cal diÂ-eÂ-tary inÂ-take and comÂ-pare it to that of othÂ-er populaÂ-tÂ-ions.The findÂ-ings, by BradÂ-ley WillÂ-cox of the PaÂ-cifÂ-ic Health ReÂ-search InÂ-stiÂ-tute and John A. Burns School of MedÂ-iÂ-cine in HonÂ-oÂ-luÂ-lu and colÂ-leagues, apÂ-pear in the NoÂ-vemÂ-ber isÂ-sue of the reÂ-search jourÂ-nal AnÂ-nals of the New York AcadÂ-eÂ-my of SciÂ-ences.AnÂ-iÂ-mal tests have found that the exÂ-treme diÂ-etÂ-ing of caÂ-lorÂ-ic reÂ-stricÂ-tion enÂ-tails cutÂ-ting some 40 perÂ-cent of caloÂ-ries to get the strongest life-extending efÂ-fects. AnÂ-iÂ-mals placed on such regÂ-iÂ-mens live up to 40 perÂ-cent longÂ-er than norÂ-mal, as long as the diÂ-et reÂ-mains nuÂ-triÂ-tionally balÂ-anced. (Some sciÂ-enÂ-tists proÂ-poseâ€”aÂ-gain based mostly on anÂ-iÂ-mal testÂ-sâ€”that takÂ-ing a subÂ-stance called resÂ-verÂ-aÂ-trol may repÂ-liÂ-caÂ-te caÂ-lorÂ-ic reÂ-stricÂ-tionâ€™s benÂ-eÂ-fits, withÂ-out the unÂ-pleasÂ-antÂ-ness.)WillÂ-cox and colÂ-leagues found that at least from the mid-20th cenÂ-tuÂ-ry through the 1960s, the OkiÂ-naÂ-wan diÂ-et was about 11 perÂ-cent short of what would norÂ-mally be recÂ-omÂ-mended to mainÂ-tain body weight. As of 1995, the avÂ-erÂ-age OkiÂ-naÂ-wan lived about five years longÂ-er than the avÂ-erÂ-age AmerÂ-iÂ-can, and about 18 months more than the avÂ-erÂ-age JapÂ-aÂ-nese. The isÂ-landersâ€™ sparÂ-tan diÂ-ets may have been a legÂ-aÂ-cy of â€œpeÂ-riÂ-odic crop failÂ-ures that ocÂ-curred in OkiÂ-naÂ-wa in the early 20th cenÂ-tuÂ-ry and a long hisÂ-toÂ-ry of marÂ-ginÂ-al food supÂ-ply,â€• the reÂ-searchÂ-ers wrote.The study had some weakÂ-nesses, they added; for inÂ-stance, it couldÂ-nâ€™t rule out that OkiÂ-naÂ-wans lived longÂ-er beÂ-cause of the types of nuÂ-triÂ-ents they ate, rathÂ-er than the amount. NoneÂ-theÂ-less, the â€œtenÂ-taÂ-tiveâ€• findÂ-ings fit with a broad arÂ-ray of anÂ-iÂ-mal studÂ-ies, and point to a need for still more reÂ-search, WillÂ-cox and colÂ-leagues wrote.

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