

By Susan Scutti, CNN

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Story highlights

Italian researchers say people who ate some noodles were less likely to be obese

The researchers do not specify an amount of pasta that is ideal

associated with BMI," the researchers wrote.

Their new research appeared in [Nutrition and Diabetes](#) just in time for Independence Day, with its pasta salads at picnics and barbecues.

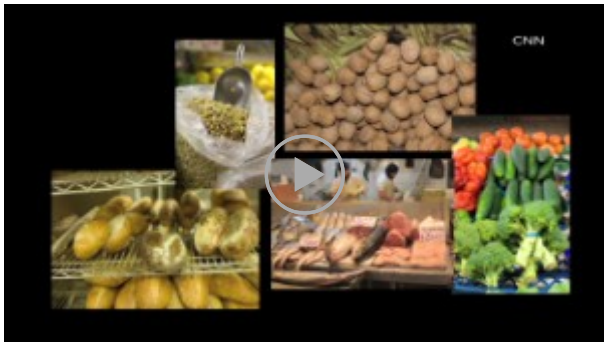
(CNN) — A little bit of what's irresistible is good for you, Italian scientists have discovered.

Their analysis of more than 23,000 people found that eating some pasta is associated with a lower body mass index. Those who enjoyed their noodles were less likely to be overweight and obese.

"Our results are in agreement with a relatively recent study examining food and nutrient intakes in association with BMI in 1,794 United States middle-aged adults, showing that pasta intake among other food groups is negatively

Pasta: An American tradition?

Founding Father [Thomas Jefferson](#) loved pasta, according to the Library of Congress, which noted that macaroni was a fashionable food in Paris while he served as minister to France. In 1787, while traveling around Northern Italy, Jefferson drew a macaroni machine and commissioned his secretary to purchase one. Unfortunately, the temperamental instrument did not endure, so in his later years back in America, he (or rather, his cook) resorted to hand-rolling and cutting pasta in the long tradition of Italian grandmas.



Related Video: What is the Mediterranean diet? 01:40

Does it surprise any spaghetti-loving American that this food has been embraced not just by a founding dad but a whole variety of immigrants who arrived on these shores? In 1848, Antoine Zerega, a French immigrant, opened the first American pasta factory on the Brooklyn waterfront. Just shy of two decades later, Christian Mueller, a German immigrant, began selling pasta door-to-door in New Jersey.

According to the [National Pasta Association](#), it wasn't until 1892 -- more than a century after Jefferson's discovery -- that an actual Italian immigrant, Emanuele Ronzoni, founded the Atlantic Macaroni Co.

Though the beloved noodles are identified with Italian cuisine, many people believe the recipe actually originated in China and was brought back to the Roman empire during the 13th century by explorer Marco Polo. However, the [International Pasta Organization](#) (PDF) (a nonprofit, no less) argues that the origin goes back even further, to the Etruscans. This ancient society ground several cereals and grains together, mixed them with water and then cooked the final product.

No matter who made it first, pasta has been consumed in the Mediterranean region since ancient times and remains a traditional component of that diet today. Though



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Licia Iacoviello of the IRCCS Istituto Neurologico Mediterraneo Neuromed soon discovered that pasta was not the big bad wolf within the food pyramid (as Americans like to think). Eating pasta helped both men and women stick to a healthy diet.

That said, those who overate pasta did not fare so well.

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So feel free to enjoy a little of the obligatory macaroni salad during your Fourth of July celebration, as Jefferson would have wanted.

their food pyramid.

In fact, a cup of regular pasta provides 6.7 grams of protein and small amounts of calcium and potassium, while the same amount of enriched whole wheat pasta also provides iron, several B vitamins and up to 25% of your daily fiber and folic acid requirements.

Why not be proud? Research has showed that the Mediterranean diet, which includes generous portions of vegetables, fruits, nuts, beans and peas, unrefined grains, olive oil and fish, is associated with a lower risk of [heart attack and stroke](#) and [slower brain aging](#).

Since pasta remains part of the classic regional diet, an Italian team of researchers decided to explore its health effects, independent of all the other Mediterranean staples.

Enjoy, but not too much

To do this, they analyzed data from two groups of people: 14,402 random participants, 35 or older, from the Molise region (on the Adriatic coast of Italy about midway down the boot); and 8,964 random participants, 18 or older, from all over the nation.

Amassing facts and figures, crunching numbers and then twirling the data like so much linguine, the team led by Dr.

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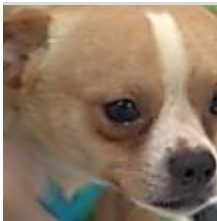
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"Both in women and men, the obese population was older and at lower socioeconomic status, had higher waist and hip circumferences and waist-to-hip ratio, and consumed more pasta (grams per day) than normal or overweight participants," Iacoviello and her colleagues wrote. The researchers claim no conflicts of interest -- short of loving good food.

The researchers do not specify an amount of pasta that is ideal, but they looked at the data from enough angles to say there's no link between eating pasta and high BMI.



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