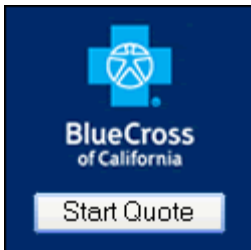




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Humans should try to increase melatonin consumption through food

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The Spanish Ageing Research Network (Red Nacional de Investigaci'n del Envejecimiento), funded by Carlos III Health Institute and headed by professor Dario Acuna Castroviejo, from the University of Granada, is very near to achieving one of today's Science greatest goals: allowing humans to age in the best possible health conditions.

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As well as from the UGR, researchers from the Spanish universities of Seville, Oviedo, Saragossa, Barcelona and Reus also took part in this study, concluding that the consumption of melatonin, a natural substance produced in small amounts by human beings and present in many types of food, delays the oxidative damage and inflammatory processes typical of the old age. Melatonin can be found in small amounts in some fruits and vegetables, like onions, cherries and bananas, and in cereals like corn, oats and rice, as well as in some aromatic plants, such as mint, lemon verbena, sage or thyme, and in red wine.

UGR participation in this study was led by professor Dario Acuna Castroviejo, member of the Institute of Biotechnology and lecturer at this University's department of Physiology. Professor Acuna Castroviejo also coordinates the Spanish Ageing Research Network. Both normal and genetically-modified mice, with an accelerated cell ageing, were analysed. "We proved", says professor Acuna Castroviejo, "that the first signs of ageing in animal tissues start at the age of five months [in mice], equivalent to 30 human years of age, due to an increase in free radicals (oxygen and nitrogen), which cause an inflammatory reaction."

The UGR researcher points out that such oxidative stress also has effects in animals' blood, as blood cells have been proven to be "more fragile with the years and, therefore, their cell membranes become easier to break".

The authors of this innovative finding administered small amounts of melatonin to mice and observed that not only did this substance neutralize the oxidative stress and the inflammatory process caused by ageing, but it also delayed its effects, thus increasing longevity. In particular, the

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University of Granada's goal was to analyse the mitochondrial function in mice and check their mitochondrial capacity to produce ATP , adenosine triphosphate , a molecule whose mission is to store the energy every cell needs to carry out its functions.

Professor Acuna Castroviejo highlights that chronic administration of melatonin in animals from the moment they stop producing this substance , five months of age in mice , helps counteract all age-related processes. Therefore, daily melatonin intake in humans from the age of 30 or 40 could prevent , or, at least, delay , illnesses related to ageing, free radicals and inflammatory processes, such as many neurodegenerative disorders (e.g. Parkinson's disease) and complications linked to other illnesses, like diabetes.

The researcher is confident that the Spanish Ministry of Health will soon legalise the use of melatonin since, being a substance naturally produced by the body, it cannot be patented and the drug industry would not make much profit out of its artificial production. However, "while the substance becomes legalised, humans should try to increase melatonin consumption through food", recommends professor Acuna Castroviejo.

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