

Fed: Blueberries, ginkgo biloba may ward off Alzheimer's

By Janelle Miles, National Medical Correspondent

BRISBANE, March 21 AAP - Blueberries and ginkgo biloba are showing promise as possible preventive measures for Alzheimer's disease, researchers say.

Diet was a major focus of the International Healthy Ageing and Longevity Conference in Brisbane at the weekend.

American researcher Jim Joseph told the conference he'd shown feeding blueberries to mice with brain plaques, similar to those in Alzheimer's patients, improved neuronal communication.

"The interesting thing was when we looked to see whether we reduced the number of plaques in the animal, we didn't," Dr Joseph said outside the conference.

"But they started doing better. They didn't show the cognitive deficits ... which means that what we did was we improved the signalling, communication in the brain."

Dr Joseph, head of the neuroscience laboratory at the Human Nutrition Research Centre on Ageing at Tufts University in Boston, said epidemiological evidence in people had found those who ate a diet high in fruit and vegetables were less likely to develop Alzheimer's disease.

And colleagues at Cornell University were about to present positive findings from a small study of humans who improved their reaction speeds by adding a cup or two of blueberries to their daily dietary intake.

The results of the study would be presented to the American Ageing Association in June, Dr Joseph said.

Herbal researcher Kerry Bone, of the University of New England in Armidale, told the conference ginkgo biloba had been shown to protect brain cells from damage.

"There's been many, many studies of ginkgo biloba that shows it's of value in protecting nerve cells from damage and keeping the brain healthy," he said in an interview.

"Clinical trials in people who actually have Alzheimer's Disease have found it delays the ... decline in memory.

"Given that ginkgo has shown some clinical benefit in Alzheimer's disease and given that it preserves brain cells, it's an obvious candidate to put forward for prevention of Alzheimer's disease."

Associate Professor Bone said a clinical trial was underway in the United States with a population of people considered at risk of developing Alzheimer's disease to gauge whether it could prevent the illness.

"On the face of it, this is probably the best herbal candidate we have to date for prevention of Alzheimer's disease," he said.

Nevertheless, patients are advised to consult with their general practitioners before using ginkgo biloba extracts, especially those taking blood-thinning drugs such as aspirin.

Case studies suggest daily use of the popular Chinese herb can cause excessive bleeding in some people.

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