

Risk of muscle loss in old age differs per ethnic group

Muscle mass and strength start to decrease from the age of 30 and this gets worse around the age of 60. PhD student Berber Dorhout discovered that the risk of that condition, sarcopenia, depends on a person's ethnic background.

People from Suriname with South Asian ancestry are particularly prone to an increased risk of sarcopenia, Dorhout discovered during her PhD research at Human Nutrition and Health. The muscle disorder occurs about twice as often in this ethnic group than in people with Dutch, Turkish, Moroccan, African-Surinamese or Ghanaian ancestry. This was shown in a study involving more than 5000 test subjects over the age of 55. The risk of sarcopenia also differs between the other ethnic groups, although the difference is less pronounced.

Eating habits

The reason for these differences is still unclear, although Dorhout thinks there are several factors involved. Muscles need training and proteins to maintain themselves. Eating habits therefore play an important role. It is precisely those habits that are strongly influenced by culture. For example, chicken and dried fish are the main sources of protein for people from Suriname, while the Dutch get much of their protein from cheese and milk.

'Social behaviour around food also plays a role,' explains Dorhout. In certain cultures it is not socially acceptable to refuse food during family gatherings. It can then be difficult to get the right nutrients and sufficient protein. In addition, not all cultures view exercise in the same way.



'Sweating or mixed sports are taboo in some cultures,' says Dorhout.

Training

Genetic differences play a role as well. So big a role, in fact, that the study could give a distorted picture. 'Body composition and fat distribution differ between ethnic groups,' says the PhD student, yet the scientists used the same yardstick to measure sarcopenia in all subjects. Even so, the new awareness obtained from the PhD research should help in designing training programmes for the elderly. 'Now we know that they should take each person's ethnic background into account, as well as cultural factors.' NVTWH