

LIFESTYLES

Southern cooking

Q. I love southern cooking and I was wondering what you thought about it from a geezer health standpoint.

A. Every time I've traveled south, I've been struck by the food many southerners eat. Lots of fat, salt, sugar and other harmful foods in great quantities.

I remember trying to get a Kaiser roll in a neighborhood grocery in North Carolina. The best I could do was a Moon Pie, a chocolate-covered pastry made with two round graham cracker cookies and marshmallow filling in the center.

I also recall my first dish of Smithfield Ham that I ordered in a Virginia restaurant. I thought I was a deer at a salt lick. I sent it back with a befuddled waiter.

My dining experiences in the South always made me wonder why all hushpuppy-popping southerners were not on the ground clutching their chests. For those who've never popped a hushpuppy (I love them), you should know that they are finger-shaped dumplings of cornmeal that are deep-fried and traditionally served with fried catfish.

In the years that I've been writing my senior health column, I've run across an expression I would like to share with y'all. In medical literature, the southeast quadrant of the United States is known as the *Stroke Belt*. The message is clear: If you eat a traditional southern diet, you go south and die.

The National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI) examined age-adjusted stroke mortality rates by state. Eleven States had stroke death rates that were



**Fred
CICETTI**
HEALTH CARE WRITER

more than 10 percent higher than the U.S. average.

The Stroke Belt is made up of Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. Scientists have also identified a region they call the *Stroke Buckle*, which includes the coastal plains of the Carolinas and Georgia. People in the stroke buckle are even more likely than those in the stroke belt to have fatal strokes, researchers say.

Cerebrovascular disease or stroke is a leading cause of death. According to the World Health Organization, 15 million people suffer strokes each year. Of these, 5 million die. You are at risk for a stroke if you have high blood pressure, smoke cigarettes or are obese.

The NHLBI reports that: *Similar to the national pattern, African-American men and women in the Stroke Belt have higher death rates than white men and women. White men and women in the Stroke Belt also have a higher stroke death rates than their counterparts in other regions of the country. Thus, the higher death rates in the Stroke Belt cannot be attributed solely to the higher proportion of African-Americans.*

In a large national study, researchers found

that southerners also are more likely to experience a decline in mental processes such as memory and orientation.

Some experts believe the memory problems and other mental issues could be related to the same underlying risk factors for stroke — lifestyles that contribute to high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes and obesity.

A recent study by researchers at the University of Alabama underscored the fact that science isn't positive why the Stroke Belt has so many strokes.

"We found geographic and racial differences are useful in predicting stroke risk, but they only explain less than half the picture," said Dr. George Howard, professor of biostatistics at the university, and a principal investigator of the study. "Something else is happening. It could be exposure to allergens in the home, it could be micronutrients in drinking water or it could be other factors considered *non-traditional* because they don't fall into the list of nine factors commonly used to predict stroke risk."

Another study found that eating fried fish — a staple in the Stroke Belt — may contribute to the higher rate of fatal strokes. Research indicates that frying fish diminishes the benefits of the omega-3 fatty acids in fish. Studies have demonstrated that these acids reduce the risk of stroke.

If you would like to ask a question, write to fred@healthygeezers.com.

Cicetti is a health care writer with more than 40 years of journalistic experience.

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