

DC On-Line

Brian Sutton, DC

Vitamin C and Hardened Arteries

A new study from the University of Southern California¹ surprised its authors with results that suggest vitamin C supplements might accelerate atherosclerotic changes. The study involved 573 healthy middle-aged utility workers; 30 percent took vitamin supplements regularly.

Researchers compared ultrasound studies of the subjects' carotid arteries, taken 18 months apart. Smoking seemed to increase the speed of arterial thickening (presumably due to plaque deposition) at five times the normal rate. However, the researchers also found that those who took a daily dose of about 500 mg of vitamin C for at least 12 months during the study showed an accelerated thickening of the arterial wall by a factor of two and one-half, compared to similarly matched persons not taking supplements.

More studies are likely to follow to try and validate these conclusions, but the authors suggest that in the meantime, people might be well-advised to favor getting their vitamins from the foods they eat when possible.

1. Presented by Dr. James Dwyer at a meeting in San Diego of the American Heart Association, March 2, 2000.

Marijuana and the Heart

New research presented at an American Heart Association conference² concludes that smoking marijuana temporarily increases the risk of heart attack. In a healthy middle-aged person, they say, the chance of having a heart attack is five times above normal for the first hour after smoking a joint. During the second hour, the risk goes down to twice the average rate, then gradually returns to normal. While a healthy person may not be likely to have problems, they say, those already at risk may be affected. The increased likelihood of problems translates roughly to two times that of vigorous exercise or sex.³

2. Dr. Murray Mittleman of the Harvard School of Public Health, March 2, 2000.

3. Associated Press, March 2, 2000.

Salted Sperm

A study published in *New Scientist*⁴ offers a potential reason for falling sperm counts reported by some research: iodized salt. A number of studies have reported decreasing sperm counts in many countries (though other studies deny the problem). This new work looks closer at one that focused

on data from America in 1960. Researchers found that the average year of birth of the men in that study was 1924, the year iodized salt was introduced to ensure proper brain development. This in itself might be a feeble link, but subsequent studies on rats found that high levels of iodine stunted testicle growth. The lead researcher was somewhat hesitant about reporting his findings, and hopes people don't decide that fertility is more important than brain development.

4. *New Scientist*, March 1, 2000, by James Crissman of the Dow Chemical Company and associates from the University of Illinois.

Stress Slows Healing

Researchers from Ohio report that wounds heal slower when patients are under psychological stress.⁵ In this small study, women were inflicted with a small wound and the healing time measured. Women who scored high on a standardized test for stress (most of whom were caring for relatives suffering from Alzheimer's disease) took nine days longer to heal. The researchers suspect that the inflammatory process is sluggish when under stress, which in turn delays subsequent stages of healing.

5. Dr. Janice Kiecolt-Glaser of the University of Ohio and Dr. Ronald Glaser, immunologist, in a presentation to the British Psychological Society, April 15, 2000.

Candle Warning

The consumer advocacy group Public Citizen is warning that some candles release lead into the air when burned. They checked 285 candles purchased in the Washington, D.C. area and found that nine had metal stiffeners inside the cotton wick that contained high amounts of lead. After the candle burns in a room for a reasonable length of time, the group says, a toddler spending 20 minutes in that room will receive an amount of lead exposure that the Consumer Product Safety Commission considers dangerous in a given day.

Most of the candles containing lead were manufactured in China, which supplies about 40 percent of U.S. candles. U.S. candlemakers volunteered not to use lead in a 1974 agreement with the Consumer Product Safety Commission, using paper or zinc stiffeners instead. However, one of the candles containing a leaded wick tested by Public Citizen was manufactured in the United States.⁶

6. Associated Press, February 24, 2000.

Psychotropic Preschool Drugs

A study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*⁷ reports that the use of psychotropic drugs such as Ritalin and Prozac is increasing at a dramatic rate. This work finds that from 1991 to 1995, such prescriptions increased by 50 percent, from 100,000 to 150,000, for children aged 2-4. In 1995, 60 percent of these youngsters on the drugs were age four; 30 percent were three; and 10 percent were two year-olds. The authors of the study are concerned with the trend, especially since there is little evidence to show the drugs offer more benefit than harm, and that the potential damaging effects on brain development have not been investigated. The FDA has

asked the drug manufacturers to look into this.⁸

7. *JAMA*, February 23, 2000.

8. Associated Press, February 22, 2000.

Nicotine for Tourette's Syndrome

Researchers investigating the more positive effects of a cigarette's most infamous ingredient, nicotine, report that it appears to offer some benefit to children with Tourette's syndrome.⁹ Researchers used low-dose nicotine patches on Tourette's patients in a placebo-controlled study of 100 children. Nicotine has also appeared to produce benefits (in other preliminary studies) in Alzheimer's and Parkinson's patients. Several drug companies are working on nicotine substitutes, which have the primary advantage of being patentable; nicotine is not.

9. Associated Press, February 21, 2000, reporting on the not-yet published work of Dr. Paul R. Sanberg of the University of South Florida.

Pilot Cancer

Research published in *Occupational and Environmental Medicine*¹⁰ reports a high rate of skin cancer among airline pilots. Scientists examined health data from 265 fliers and found up to 25 times the expected rate of malignant melanoma. The highest rates were seen among pilots who routinely flew across five or more time zones. Since the pilots' exposure to radiation was estimated to be well within occupational safety standards, the researchers hypothesize that the cause is due to disturbed sleep patterns, possibly involving melatonin fluctuations.

10. *OEM*, February 2000, Dr. Vilhjalmur Rafnsson, et al.

Drug Dispensing Errors

An investigative report,¹¹ stimulated by recent media attention involving the high number of deaths due to medical mistakes, attempted to quantify any such problem involving the dispensing of drugs at your local pharmacy. They found that no such data exists, primarily because pharmacies are not required to report errors to any authority (except in Georgia and North Carolina - those states require a report in the case of "significant" harm, and death). No industry-wide statistics are kept, as errors might be handled (and go no further) at any level including: the pharmacist; his/her manager; the store or corporate office; an insurance company; a complaint to the state regulatory agency; or, if litigation results, the court system.

North Carolina officials say that 36 deaths were reported in 1999, but believe that many more are never reported. The nonprofit Institute for Safe Medication Practices estimates that 2-3 percent of filled prescriptions are erroneous. Many pharmacists blame mistakes on ever-increasing workloads. In one case that went to court, the pharmacist was working 12 hours each day, five days per week. The AP report blames the increased workload on insurance companies for encouraging doctors to prescribe a pill instead of using a more expensive treatment that might

require hospitalization or other physician-intensive attention.

11. "Deadly Doses." Associated Press, February 12, 2000.

Imagine Immunity

British researchers working with cancer patients report that relaxation and guided imagery techniques appear to boost a patient's immune system.¹² They took a small group of 80 women undergoing chemotherapy for breast cancer and randomly chose half for additional muscle relaxation and imagery therapies. They found a significant increase in certain important immune system components in the latter group. This was even evident in patients taking immunosuppressant drugs. The imagery technique involved the patients imagining their body fighting cancerous cells. This study, not yet published, did not measure specific outcomes of the disease process.

12. Professor Leslie Walker of the Institute of Rehabilitation and Oncology Health at the University of Hull, Northern England, in a presentation to the British Psychological Society, April 15, 2000.

Alone with Alzheimer's

A new study published in *The Lancet*¹³ reports that elderly persons living alone are more likely to suffer from mental declines such as Alzheimer's disease or other dementias. The study is based on interviews with 1,200 seniors over 75 years old, none of whom had been diagnosed with dementia at the onset of the study. Three years later, the diagnosis was made in 176 of these patients. By analyzing the original interviews, the researchers calculate that those without a social network were given the diagnosis at a rate 60 percent higher than the others. They suspect, as other studies have suggested, that mental stimulation (or lack thereof) plays an important role.

13. *The Lancet*, April 15, 2000.

Ginkgo and Ginseng Research

A new double-blind, placebo-controlled study of ginkgo biloba and ginseng reports very favorable results in cognitive performance.¹⁴ British researchers compared doses of ginkgo and ginseng to a placebo and measured attention span and short-term memory. Attentiveness and alertness were significantly improved in the volunteers by one dose of ginkgo at nine o'clock in the morning; the condition lasted until three in the afternoon. The optimum dose was judged to be 360 mg. A single 400 mg dose of ginseng produced improvements in short-term memory and concentration throughout the day.

14. Dr. Andrew Scholey of the University of Northumbria, et al., in a report to the British Psychological Society in Winchester, April 14, 2000. The research was funded by Pharmaton Natural Health Products.

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