

DC On Line

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More Coffee, Fewer Gallstones

The *Journal of the American Medical Association*¹ reports that gallstones occur less frequently in coffee drinkers. The study from Harvard University School of Public Health found a 45% decrease in men who drank four or more cups per day. Two to three cups per day were almost as good, producing a 40% decreased risk. Only caffeinated coffee will do, though. Decaffeinated coffee, tea with caffeine and soda did not inhibit gallstone formation much. Researchers assume this to be due to the lower levels of caffeine. The study involved 46,000 men over a 10-year period.

1. *JAMA*, June 9, 1999.

Studying Genetics

Oregon researchers² warn that interpreting results of behavior relating to genetic makeup may be trickier than most scientists think. They tested genetically identical mice in theoretically standard ways, with sometimes dramatically different outcomes. It appears that subtle differences in the environment of the laboratory doing the testing can skew the results of the tests.

In this case, they were testing for sensitivity to drugs such as alcohol and cocaine. Differences in behavioral reactions can apparently be influenced by such things as the personality of the technician handling the animals. This can be misleading if you're attempting to duplicate research or quantify the effect of a genetic change in an animal.³

2. Led by John Crabbe of the Oregon Health Sciences University.

3. *Science*, June 1999.

Waist Size a Factor in Sex of Offspring

The journal *Nature*⁴ reports that men desiring male offspring might do well by taking into account their potential mate's waist size. In a Jamaican study comparing tubular-shaped women to those with an hourglass figure, it was found that those with the thickest waists bear 50% more male than female children. This is the third study to reach similar conclusions, the others having been done in Texas and England.⁵ The children of these women also tend to show more "physical signs of having higher testosterone levels."

4. *Nature*, May 1999.

5. *United Press*, May 28, 1999.

Mitral Valve Prolapse - Don't Panic

A study of over 3,400 volunteers in Boston is debunking many long-held views of mitral valve prolapses (a condition where the valve sinks down into the left atrium). Patients have been alarmed for many years by their doctors warning that the condition exists in up to 30% of the population, and that it can cause sudden and serious complications if not treated with surgery. It has also been said to be particularly prevalent in women under the age of 45.

However, this study concludes that the condition:

- affects men and women equally;
- is present in only about 2.4% of the population; and
- results in serious complications in only six percent of those affected.

Stroke, heart failure and abnormal heart rhythms leading to fainting spells have also been blamed on the condition. Indeed, some of the volunteers with mitral valve prolapse experienced these problems - but at the same rate as those without the condition.⁶

6. *NEJM*, July 1, 1999.

Low Potency HRT

A new study on the effects of low potency hormone replacement therapy (HRT) suggests that it is not as benign as many doctors have hoped. This Swedish work involving 4,000 women concludes that long term use increases the risk of endometrial cancer. Among the women who took low doses of oral estrogen, the risk of cancer doubled compared to those taking none; if they took it for five years or more, the risk tripled. Abnormal endometrial cells were found in the HRT women eight times as often. Once the women stopped HRT, the risks quickly decreased.⁷

7. *The Lancet*, May 29, 1999.

TV and Eating Disorders in Paradise

A Harvard researcher⁸ reports that television appears to have increased the incidence of eating disorders among teenage girls in Fiji by a factor of five. In 1995, only three percent of girls said they vomited to control their weight. That same year, television was introduced to Fiji. Three years later, the amount had risen to 15%. Indications are that television shows (mostly from America, Australia and Great Britain) caused the girls to revise their idea of the optimum body shape.

8. Anne Becker, reporting to an American Psychiatric Association conference in Washington, May 19, 1999.

Tea for the Heart

A new study by a Harvard Medical School heart specialist⁹ suggests that a cup of tea each day may

help protect against heart disease. He found a 44% decrease in heart attacks among tea drinkers who consumed as little as one cup per day. The benefits are credited to the flavonoid content of tea.

The study involved 340 men and women who drank tea and/or coffee. The tea consumed was the black tea variety. Coffee (regular or decaf) did not appear to influence the incidence of heart attacks one way or the other.

9. Dr. Michael Gaziano, presenting to the Royal Society of Medicine conference in London, July 8, 1999.

Early Month Mortality

A group from the University of California at San Diego¹⁰ reports that death rates are higher during the first week of each month. The research is based on an analysis of nearly 32 million death certificates. Most notable was a 14% higher rate of violent deaths involving substance abuse. The researchers speculate that the first portion of welfare and disability payments is often spent on drugs and alcohol, leading to more care accidents, overdoses and homicides.¹¹ A smaller increase in deaths attributed to natural causes was also noted.

10. David Phillips, et al.

11. United Press, July 9, 1999.

Mental Acuity in Elderly

A study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*¹² concludes that aging itself does not lead to a decline in memory and intellect. This study of nearly 6,000 elderly (aged 70 and older) over a 10-year period found no significant loss of mental skills in 70% of the subjects. Those that did experience a loss of mental acuity generally were afflicted with cardiovascular disease, diabetes, or had risk factors for Alzheimer's disease.

12. *JAMA*, July 7, 1999.

Clinical Estimation of Survival

Canadian researchers report in the journal *Cancer*¹³ that doctors are not very good at guessing how long a terminally ill patient will live, a game technically known as CES (clinical estimation of survival). The group followed up on initial predictions made by doctors of 248 cancer patients that had run out of medical treatment options. The most frequent CESs were for two to six months. Of these, the physicians were correct about one third of the time. A third of the patients died earlier and a third lived longer. In other words, the doctors were wrong most of the time.

13. *Cancer*, July 1, 1999.

Shining Scholastic Performance

A study commissioned by the California Board for Energy Efficiency concludes that natural lighting can have a dramatic effect on a child's performance in school. An analysis of the learning environment and test scores of 21,000 elementary students revealed a 26% higher performance in reading and 20% better grades in math for those pupils in rooms with the most natural lighting. Even commercial enterprises seem to profit from sunlight. A major retail chain of over 100 stores reported a 40% higher sales total in its stores with skylights compared to similar stores with none.¹⁴

14. United Press, June 30, 1999, reporting on studies by Lisa Hescong of the Hescong Mahone Group.

Scottish Alcohol Study

In a study that reached conclusions directly contradicting a number of other recent works, Scottish researchers report no health benefits from alcohol consumption. Researchers from the University of Bristol tracked 5,766 men over a 21-year period and correlated their health and mortality statistics with their drinking habits. They found no difference in deaths between abstainers and moderate drinkers (up to 14 units of alcohol per week).

A unit of alcohol was defined as eight ounces of beer, a glass of wine or a shot of liquor. Heavy drinkers, though (more than 35 units), died from stroke twice as often as the moderate or non-drinkers. The stroke risk became statistically significant at about 22 units of alcohol per week.¹⁵

The researchers speculate that the differences between their study and others with different outcomes may be in the drinking patterns. It could be, they say, that health benefits may become apparent if the drinking is evenly spaced over the week instead of the majority of alcoholic drinks being consumed during weekend binges.

15. *British Medical Journal*, June 26, 1999.

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