

DC On-Line

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Link between Zinc and Anorexia?

Researchers at the University of Illinois report a possible link between zinc intake and anorexia in teenagers and the elderly. They have found certain metabolic disturbances in zinc-deficient rats that resemble changes seen in anorexic patients. While they do not cite zinc deficiency as a direct cause of appetite loss, the authors suggest that it may have an exacerbating effect¹

1. Shay N, et al. *Journal of Nutrition*, September 1998.

Distorted Reality

While you might think that young couch potatoes are less at risk for physical injuries than more athletically inclined children, a new report in the *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*² finds just the opposite. Researchers from the University of Granada in Spain report that the more a child sits in front of the television set, the more likely he is to experience preventable accidental injuries.

Surveying children and their families taken to the emergency room for fractures, burns, multiple contusions, and other physical injuries, they found that the injured children spent more hours in front of the television than others in their age group. The researchers suspect that the reason is a distorted reality presented by television shows that gives a child a false sense of invincibility.³

2. *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, August 1998.

3. *APAM*, August 1998.

Household Antibacterial Agents

A geneticist from Tufts University Medical School in Boston is warning that the wealth of antibacterial products that populate your local grocery store shelves may be leading to more serious bacterial infections in the population at large.⁴ The ingredient he is most concerned with is triclosan, formerly an antimicrobial agent reserved for use in hospital rooms and food service areas that needed to be sterile, but which is now being used in a plethora of products that he calls "over-the-counter antibiotics."⁵ It is now found in items ranging from gym socks (to minimize odor) to antibacterial high chair varnishes.

The studies suggest that the chemical affects a specific cell wall construction enzyme that is also attacked by a drug currently used to treat tuberculosis. If resistance should develop, he fears the TB medication will also become impotent. In a healthy household, he says, soap and water are the

best cleaning agents.

4. Levy S, et al. *Nature*, August 1998.

5. Associated Press, August 6, 1998.

Happiness is Friends

A group of psychologists at the University of Michigan set out to find what most contributes to a person's happiness after retirement. They interviewed 100 people both before and after retirement and then analyzed their feelings of satisfaction about life. Among the many factors examined (which included financial security, health, and negative life experiences, among others), the researchers found that the greatest predictor of happiness was the size of the person's social support network. Those with the greatest number of friends were most inclined to say they were very happy with life.⁶

6. United Press, July 29, 1998.

Diabetic Liver Damage

The consumer advocacy group Public Citizen has filed a petition with the FDA concerning the drug Rezulin, a medical treatment used for type II diabetes. The group wants the FDA to pull the drug from the market, as did Great Britain, to stop more people from dying of liver failure. Twenty-one deaths resulted from the preparation during its first 15 months on the market, and many more people were hospitalized or required liver transplants. The manufacturer says that the real problem is that doctors are not monitoring their patients' liver functions well enough; permanent damage can be prevented, they say, if treatment is stopped soon after signs arise.⁷

7. Associated Press, July 27, 1998.

Another Deadly Treatment

British researchers report that a treatment for shock that has been used for 50 years has probably killed more people than it has saved. Human albumin, a protein infused into the bloodstream, has been used to treat blood loss and other emergencies. A review of 30 trials found that those treated with albumin died more frequently than those who did not get the treatment. Researchers think that albumin leaks from the circulatory system into surrounding tissues (such as the lungs), drawing fluid with it.⁸

8. *British Medical Journal*, July 25, 1998.

Harzards of Post-Op Radiotherapy

A study published in *The Lancet*⁹ warns that a standard treatment for many types of lung cancer increases the death rate. Researchers found a 21 percent increase in deaths among patients given

both surgical and radiological treatments for their cancer compared to those who received surgery alone. Many of those in the radiology group who died were only in the early stages of the disease.

"No group of patients appeared to derive a clear survival benefit from postoperative radiotherapy,"¹⁰ noted the lead researcher. He noted that the treatment represents "a substantial hazard to these patients." Researchers suspect that many of the deaths are a result of radiation pneumonitis, a very serious lung inflammation that may develop three to twelve months after radiation exposure.

9. *The Lancet*, July 25, 1998.

10. Reuters, July 24, 1998 interview with Dr. Lesley Stewart of Britain's Medical Research Council.

B-6 for the Heart

A study from the University of Minnesota suggests that vitamin B-6 offers protection from heart disease. Researchers took blood samples of 759 initially healthy volunteers, then compared the analysis to the rate at which heart disease developed years later. Persons with higher blood levels of B-6 had only one-third the risk of developing heart disease compared to those with lower levels of the vitamin. In this study, no relationship between homocysteine and heart disease was apparent.¹¹

11. *Circulation*, July 1998.

Placebos for Depression

A study in *Prevention and Treatment*¹² concludes that for many anti-depressive drugs the placebo effect is the main curative agent. Researchers analyzed data from 19 randomized, placebo-controlled studies and found that while 25 percent of any improvements seen could be attributed to pharmacological effects, 75 percent of a given patient's recovery was attributed to the simple fact that the patient was taking a pill -- any pill. Even the 25 percent improvement credited to the medication may be suspect, however, as the researchers speculate that for some patients, drugs may enhance the placebo effect because the patients "could tell by the side effects that they had taken something," thereby enhancing their faith in the medication.

12. *Prevention and Treatment*, July 1998.

Drug Rush at FDA

Concerns are mounting that the FDA is too quick to approve new and exciting drugs for distribution in the marketplace. Over a period of 10 months ending last July, nearly as many drugs have been pulled off the market as had been during the entire previous decade, because of dangerous side-effects. Insiders say that the FDA is under political pressure to speed up approvals; that safety problems that arise are ignored; and that inspectors should "give the drug company the benefit of the doubt."¹³

Many of the drugs suddenly removed from the market this past year had prompted warnings from experts before the drug was approved. The FDA maintains that the current system is working, though, since drugs are quickly pulled off the market as soon as it is obvious that they are killing people.

13. Associated Press, July 10, 1998, quoting Elizabeth Barbehenn, a former FDA employee who spent 13 years monitoring experimental drug safety.

Accidents and Anxiety Treatments

Common anti-anxiety drugs seem to be contributing to the frequency of automobile accidents, according to a new study published in the *British Medical Journal*.¹⁴ This research finds that people taking drugs such as valium are more than twice as likely to be involved in an accident, and more than three times as likely if they are under 45 years old. These findings apply even if the patient does not feel drowsy after taking the drug. The study looked at drugs taken for anxiety, other stress-related disorders, and muscle spasms.

14. *BMJ*, October 31, 1998.

Protection from Incompetent Doctors Needed

A report issued to the U.S. government by the Pew Health Professions Commission warns that a very large number of doctors practicing in America are incompetent.¹⁵ The commission, led by former Senator George Mitchell, is recommending periodic minimum competency certifications throughout a health care professional's career, not just at the beginning as is the current practice. They cite a report that found more than 16,000 doctors who had been disciplined for incompetency, crimes, negligence, or prescription irregularities. This figure is thought to represent only a small part of the overall problem.

15. Reuters, October 23, 1998.

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