

DC On-Line

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If It Ain't Broke...

Doctors from the Cleveland Clinic, investigating how well a combination of aspirin and the blood thinner Plavix would work to prevent deaths in relatively healthy individuals, were a bit surprised by their study. The two drugs are often recommended to patients under the assumption that their complementary actions would exert an extra beneficial effect on the cardiovascular system. However, for those with worrisome high blood pressure or high cholesterol reading, but no overt arterial clogging, this study found that the combination produced a near-doubling of the death rate from cardiac problems over two years.¹ Experts conclude that the \$4 per-pill Plavix is not useful for prevention.²

1. *NEJM*, April 20, 2006.
 2. Associated Press, March 12, 2006.
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Fat From Soda

A 10-year study of 2,400 girls concludes that an increase in soft-drink consumption leads to corresponding weight gain. The study was able to correlate a higher BMI with dietary trends that replaced milk and fruit juices with a two-to-threefold increased consumption of soda pop.³ The study followed the girls from age 9 to age 19.

1. *Journal of Pediatrics*, February 2006.
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Diversified Cholesterol Diets

Researchers from the University of Toronto report that a diet that combines a variety of healthy foods can decrease LDL cholesterol levels up to 20 percent, rivaling results reported by many popular cholesterol-lowering drugs. The key to the diet was combining a number of different foods such as plant sterols, soy protein, viscous fibers (found in oats, barley and eggplant) and almonds⁴ instead of concentrating on just one type of food. Cholesterol levels, measured at three months and 12 months, showed an average reduction of about 13 percent⁵ attributable to the diet.

1. Reuters, March 23, 2006.
 2. *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, March 2006.
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Capsaicin Kills Cancer

A study of prostate cancer in mice concludes that the ingredient that puts the "hot" in hot peppers causes tumor cells to self-destruct. Tumors in mice that were fed the compound grew to only one-fifth the size of the control group.⁶ The mice consumed the equivalent of what would be between three and eight fresh habañero peppers for humans, three times per week. ¡Ay, caramba!

1. *Cancer Research*, March 15, 2006; Dr. Soren Lehmann of the Cedars-Sinai Medical Center and the University of California Los Angeles School of Medicine.
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Psychotic Children Abound

An analysis of annual health surveys of children averaging approximately 13 years of age has found that the use of antipsychotic drugs on children has quintupled between 1995 and 2002. This means that about 2.5 million kids are taking the medications, or about 40 out of every 1,000. Researchers are a bit concerned because of indications that they (the drugs) are being used in large part to treat conditions for which they have not been proven effective.⁷

1. Associated Press, March 16, 2006, reporting on the work of Dr. William Cooper, a pediatrician at Vanderbilt Children's Hospital.
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Steroids, Rheumatoid Arthritis, and Pneumonia

A study on the effect of low doses of Prednisone (a steroid drug) for the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis concludes that the regimen leads to an increased mortality from pneumonia. The study looked at 16,788 elderly patients over a three-and-a-half-year period. When compared to nonsteroid treatments, the Prednisone patients showed a 70 percent greater chance of contracting pneumonia.⁸ One of the known actions of steroid drugs is suppression of the immune system. Pneumonia is one of the leading causes of death among those suffering from rheumatoid arthritis.

1. *Arthritis & Rheumatism*, February 2006.
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Veggie Eaters Can Breathe Easier

A report published in the journal *Thorax*⁹ concludes that a higher intake of certain vegetables has a protective effect against asthma. This study analyzed data from 69,000 French women and correlated their diets with the incidence of asthma. They found that women consuming the highest amounts of leafy greens (such as spinach and lettuce), carrots and tomatoes reported a 20 percent lower incidence of asthma than those who rarely included such items in their meals. There is some question, however, as to whether these vegetables themselves are responsible for the health benefits, or if their consumption is just a sign of an overall healthier lifestyle.

1. *Thorax* 2006;61:209-215.
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The Idiot Box Concept

Research from Brooklyn College of the City University of New York seems to validate what many of us have instinctively suspected: A steady routine of viewing certain types of television shows may be harmful to your intellect. Researchers analyzed the viewing habits of 289 women and compared the results with standardized tests on memory, attention and cognitive skills. Those women who named soap operas or daytime talk shows as their viewing preference were seven and 13 times more likely, respectively, to show signs of clinical mental impairment compared to those who favored news programs and similar shows. While it is still unclear from the study if the shows promote a mental decline, or if persons of such mental capacities gravitate toward such shows (I suspect varying degrees of both), the researchers say the relationship is strong enough to justify a physician asking about television preferences to help decide whether further mental evaluation should be pursued.¹⁰

1. *Southern Medical Journal*, March 2006.
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Folic Acid for the Pancreas

A study published in the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute*¹¹ suggests that an increased dietary intake of folate offers a protective effect against pancreatic cancer. The research involved more than 80,000 men and women over a period of seven years. Researchers found that those with the highest intake of folate (350 micrograms per day) were 75 percent less likely to develop pancreatic cancer than those with the lowest intake (less than 200 micrograms). The benefits were only seen when the folacin occurred naturally in the diet, however; dietary supplements produced no benefit.

1. *Journal of the National Cancer Institute*, March 15, 2006.
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Ignorance Is Ecstasy

Researchers from the University of Toronto at Scarborough report that not only does the recreational drug Ecstasy cause learning and memory impairments, but that the damage also is most likely permanent. This small study of 15 people was completed over a two-year period. A number of the individuals had stopped using the drug after the first year; thus, the team was able to test for any recovery of mental facilities. They used the Rivermead Behavioral Memory Test to measure everyday memory function. Some of those who had stopped using the drug improved their scores somewhat, but others stayed the same. Those still using the drug continued their mental decline.¹²

1. *Neurology* 2006;66:740-741.
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Lymphomas From Antibiotics

Researchers investigating the increased incidence of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma (NHL) in recent years were able to find a marginal relationship to the popular medications they tested, and only for NSAIDs. However, after analyzing data from the Scandinavian Lymphoma Etiology Study of more than 6,000 subjects, they discovered a striking correlation between antibiotic use and all subtypes of NHL.¹³ Further research is likely to be commissioned to clarify whether antibiotics are indeed a causative agent, or merely incidentally present along with a more subtle underlying condition.

1. *American Journal of Epidemiology*, Nov. 15, 2005.
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Complex Calcium Consumption

Researches studying the bones of pubescent girls in Finland¹⁴ report that better bones are built if the calcium in the diet comes from natural sources such as cheese, rather than from a dietary supplement. The study involved 195 healthy 10-to-12-year-old girls. They were divided into groups and given either calcium tablets, calcium tablets with vitamin D, cheese, or placebos for the duration of the study. Bone mass and body composition measurements were taken, and the researchers concluded that the best bone development was seen in the cheese group. It should be noted that in this study, few (if any) of the girls began with severe calcium deficiency.

1. *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, November 2005.

MAY 2006

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