

DC Online

Brian Sutton, DC

Don't Dust Too Much

A report in *The New England Journal of Medicine* suggests that a dusty environment actually may help prevent children from developing asthma. Researchers vacuumed dust and bacteria from children's mattresses and correlated the quantities obtained with the incidence of asthma among the 800 pre teenagers in this study. The children living in the cleanest environments were more likely to suffer from asthma. The lowest rates of the breathing disorder were found in the dustiest homes. This applied to both farm and nonfarm environments. The study follows an earlier one that found fewer allergies among children who had pets.¹

1. *NEJM*, September 19, 2002.

Irregular Heartbeat Treatments

A study of more than 4,000 patients with atrial fibrillation in the United States and Canada finds little difference between two major treatment alternatives. The method generally favored by most medical doctors is to prescribe anti-arrhythmia drugs, which attempt to control the regularity of the heartbeat (as well as the speed) and can be quite expensive. The other, less expensive method is to prescribe drugs that simply slow down an excessive heart rate without affecting the rhythm. This study found that the less expensive treatment resulted in about 13 percent fewer deaths, although that figure was not thought to be significant. However, side-effects and hospitalizations of that same group were significantly less than those of the rhythm-controlled group, suggesting that the less expensive (and less prescribed) treatment is probably better.²

1. *New England Journal of Medicine*, December 5, 2002.

Diagnosing Heart Disease with Mammograms

A report from the Mayo Clinic suggests that mammograms may contain information that could help radiologists detect early cardiovascular disease in women. A study of 1,803 women found a correlation between heart disease and arterial calcifications visible on the mammograms. The study found that women with these findings had a 20-percent higher likelihood of having heart disease, as demonstrated by angiograms. The concept could be important in women's health, since women will have a mammogram done routinely, though heart disease kills almost ten times as many women as breast cancer.³

1. Associated Press, reporting on the work of Dr. Kirk Doerger, December 4, 2002.
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Depressing News about Marijuana

Three studies published in *The New England Journal of Medicine*⁴ report that people who smoke cannabis are more likely to suffer from depression and schizophrenia later in life. The effect appears to be related to overall length of exposure or age of first use, with young children being affected more profoundly. Teenagers who began smoking pot were four times more likely to have psychiatric problems as adults than nonusers, according to one of the studies. Another study found a strong correlation between marijuana use and depression in teenage girls.

1. *NEJM*, November 21, 2002.
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Wine for the Mind

Research from Denmark suggests that a moderate amount of wine can help prevent the development of some types of dementia, including Alzheimer's disease. Individuals who drank up to 21 glasses of wine per week were less likely to have developed such brain disorders 15 years into the study, compared to nondrinkers. Unfortunately for beer lovers, their risk of developing dementia appeared to increase slightly. The study was relatively small, involving only 1,700 people; 83 were diagnosed with a dementia by the end of the study.⁵

1. *Journal of Neurology*, November 12, 2002.
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Wine for No Mind

A study of the short-term effects of drinking wine concludes that a blood alcohol level of only .04 percent will cloud a person's judgement. Typically, this level can be achieved by drinking two glasses of wine in an hour. Researchers monitored the brain activity of volunteers taking computerized testing while imbibing. They found that the part of the brain that recognizes errors did not respond well when the .04 level was reached. The researchers were surprised that there was not much difference between results at .04 percent and .10 percent blood alcohol levels.⁶

1. *Science*, November 8, 2002.
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Glaucoma Drug Affects Breathing

British researchers report that certain eye drops used to relieve glaucoma appear to trigger some

breathing problems in elderly patients. In this study of 3,000 patients, the researchers noted a 2.5-fold increase in the development of airway obstruction in older patients using beta-blocking eye drops. The study was done at the Institute of Ophthalmology in London.⁷

1. *British Medical Journal*, December 14, 2002.

Menopause Herb Study

Since hormone replacement therapy is falling out of favor, as more studies suggest a link between the drugs and breast cancer and heart disease, women have been turning to herbal remedies for relief from menopause symptoms. Research recently published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* pretty much discounts the effectiveness of most of the alternatives in use today, except for one. According to a number of trials, a North American herb, black cohosh, seems to be effective. Black cohosh is a member of the buttercup family, and has been used for a number of ailments by Native Americans for many generations.⁸

1. *Annals of Internal Medicine*, November 19, 2002.

Walk for Your Bones

A study of 61,000 women by researchers from the Harvard School of Public Health concludes that women can significantly reduce their risk of hip fractures by doing a simple exercise for just a few hours each week: walking. In fact, a one-hour walk each day can keep the bones as strong as one could hope from hormone replacement therapy. Four hours of walking per week, the researchers say, will reduce hip fracture risk by 40 percent. The study lasted 12 years and involved women between 40 and 77 years of age. If you're pressed for time, the research suggests that jogging can offer the same benefit, in a little less than half the weekly time commitment.⁹

1. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, November 13, 2002.

Flaxseed for the Prostate

A study of prostate cancer in mice suggests that flaxseed has a protective effect. Researchers from Duke University fed cancer-prone mice large quantities of flaxseed and found marked differences in the rates and characters of prostate cancer. Tumors in the flaxseed-fed group were half the size and less invasive. The amount of flaxseed in the diet was about 5 percent of total intake. The researchers credit the benefit to the omega-3 fatty acids and lignans (a type of phytoestrogen) contained in the seed.¹⁰

1. *Urology*, November 2002.

Crosswalk Danger

The Journal of the American Medical Association¹¹ reports a rather paradoxical fact: elderly pedestrians attempting to cross the street at marked crosswalks are hit by cars three times more frequently than those who cross at unmarked locations. The study analyzed pedestrian car accidents at more than 800 street locations in various cities in Washington State and California. The marked crosswalks studied were not located at intersections with stop signs or traffic signals. The researchers suggest that the marked crossings give the pedestrian a false sense of security that may result in them not being quite as alert as they might otherwise be.

1. *JAMA*, November 6, 2002.

Painful Attention

A study by German psychologists concludes that back pain can be made worse by a sympathetic spouse. Brain activity in an area known to be involved with pain interpretation was measured in response to electrical stimulation of the low back in patients suffering from chronic low back pain. Results were then correlated with the behavior of the spouse. The researchers found that individuals with spouses sympathetic in such ways as fetching medicines, giving massages, and generally waiting on the patient showed a much higher pain response. A lower pain response was seen when the spouse distracted the patient with other activities, or simply left the room. Indeed, the mere presence of a sympathetic spouse in the room appeared to increase the sensitivity to pain, suggesting some kind of conditioned response.¹²

1. Associated Press, November 2, 2002, reporting on the work of Herta Flor of the University of Heidelberg.

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