

DC Online

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Alcohol and Hormones Don't Mix

Research published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*¹ suggests that women who take hormone replacement drugs should be extremely careful about how much alcohol they consume. The study, a statistical analysis of data obtained from 44,000 U.S. nurses, suggests that as few as 1.5 drinks each day can double their risk of breast cancer. The effect appears to be related to the length of time the women took HRT medications.

1. *AIM*, November 2002.
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Sleep Apnea and Stuttering

A group from the University of California at Los Angeles reports that its research links childhood stuttering with adult sleep apnea. The group found that 38 percent of its sleep apnea subjects also stuttered when they were children. The national average is 7 percent. Using magnetic resonance imaging, the researchers noted decreased gray areas in the brain scans of the apnea patients, particularly in the areas that control speech movement and emotion. The decrease in brain cell content varied up to about 15 percent, and was directly proportional to the severity of the apnea. The authors conclude that damage to the speech area in early childhood leads to problems with the muscles controlling the airway.²

1. *American Journal of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine*, November 2002.
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Cesarean Births on the Rise

A government effort to promote vaginal delivery of babies, when advisable, appears to be failing, according to a recent study in California. The government's position is that unnecessary Cesarean procedures carry a higher risk of medical complications to the mother. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) found that the percentage of mothers who delivered vaginally after a previous Cesarean birth decreased from 23 percent in 1996 to 15 percent in 2000. The trend, as far as CDC officials can tell, mirrors what is going on in the rest of the country. The goal set by the government is 37 percent by the year 2010. Research in the 1990s pretty much discredited an earlier belief that once a Cesarean section was performed, subsequent vaginal births would cause the uterus to rupture. Doctors say the surgical procedure is on the rise because it is more convenient for doctors and patients; reduces certain lawsuit risks if there is a problem with the baby; and minimizes bladder problems in the mother.³

1. Associated Press, Nov. 7, 2002.

Exercise for Cholesterol

A number of studies at the effects of exercise have returned results that seem to indicate little effect on cholesterol levels, which has been puzzling to many. Now, a recent study reports that exercise does indeed affect cholesterol metabolism, but not in a way that is normally measured. Research from Duke University suggests that regular exercise changes the size of cholesterol complexes circulating in the bloodstream. Numerous small aggregations of cholesterol and carrier proteins are associated with a greater likelihood of blood-vessel obstruction. Exercise seems to modify the transportation of cholesterol in the blood, favoring larger, but fewer, circulating particles. Blood tests measuring total cholesterol levels show no difference, because the overall quantities are the same in both cases. Tests are available that measure the size of the protein-based cholesterol carriers, but they are two to three times as expensive as standard tests.⁴

1. *New England Journal of Medicine*, Nov. 7, 2002.

Coffee for Diabetes

Research from Vrije University in Amsterdam concludes that coffee drinking appears to assist the body in metabolizing sugar. The researchers are not sure which specific component(s) of coffee contributes to the benefit, but they found a lowered risk of type 2 diabetes in direct proportion to the amount of the beverage consumed. There did not appear to be a significant difference in whether the coffee was standard brew, latte or espresso.⁵

1. *Lancet*, Nov. 9, 2002.

Onions for the Prostate

Research from the National Cancer Institute concludes that onions and garlic contain substances that help diminish the likelihood of prostate cancer. This study found a 50-percent lowered risk in men who consumed a considerable amount of vegetables containing alum, such as garlic, chives and onions.⁶ Benefits were seen with quantities as small as 10 grams (about a third of an ounce) per day, or about one clove of garlic. Scallions seemed to offer the most benefit. The study involved 709 men, about a third of whom had been diagnosed with prostate cancer. The research was done in China, which has the world's lowest incidence of prostate cancer.⁷

1. Reuters, Nov. 6, 2002.
2. Associated Press, Nov. 5, 2002.

Dead Weight

Yet another study of weight and longevity reinforces data suggesting that excess weight shortens life. Researchers from the University of Alabama at Birmingham conclude that a 20-year-old who has a body mass index of 45 (well into the obese category) will lose 13 years of his or her life if white, and 20 years if black. The researchers are not sure why obese blacks were affected more profoundly in this study. Paradoxically, overweight, but not quite obese blacks did not appear to be as affected as whites of the same weight class. This research was based on data from more than

14,000 Americans.⁸

1. *JAMA*, Jan. 8, 2003.
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Nicotine Inhibits Cell Suicide

New research from the National Cancer Institute suggests that nicotine, one of the few ingredients of cigarette smoke not implicated as a carcinogen, appears to promote cancer in another way. Nicotine appears to activate an enzyme known as "AKT," which leads to a reaction that inhibits cellular suicide. This helps to delay the destruction of cancerous cells that may be growing in the body.⁹

1. *Journal of Clinical Investigation*, Jan. 2, 2003.
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Cocaine on the Brain

The American Journal of Psychiatry suggests a reason why so many cocaine addicts suffer from depression. The authors of the study examined brain tissue samples from 70 deceased individuals, half of whom were cocaine users. They found significantly fewer dopamine-producing brain cells (taken from the "striatum" portion of the brain) in cocaine users than in the comparison group. This suggests a lowered ability to experience pleasure, making depression more likely.¹⁰ This makes sense, since the purpose of cocaine use is to flood the brain with pleasure sensations, to which the body invariably adapts to maintain a balance.

1. *AJP*, January 2003.
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Smallpox and Blood Donations

The government¹¹ is warning recipients of the smallpox vaccine not to donate blood for a few weeks after getting the vaccine, to prevent endangering the nation's blood supply. Those with no complications should wait at least three weeks. Anyone experiencing smallpox symptoms or other side-effects should not donate until two weeks after the symptoms abate. Nonvaccinated individuals who experience skin lesions after close contact with vaccinated individuals can give blood after those lesions heal, unless they have scratched off a scab, in which case they must wait three months.¹²

1. www.fda.gov/cber/gdlns/smpoxdefquar.pdf.
 2. Associated Press, Dec. 31, 2002.
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Go Fish

A new study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association¹³ suggests men can get some of the cardiovascular benefits of fish consumption with fewer seafood-based meals. This study found that eating one to three meals containing fish each month reduced men's chances of stroke by 43 percent. More servings did not produce a greater benefit. The benefit is associated with the ischemic (clot-related) type of stroke only, not the hemorrhagic (blood-vessel-bursting) type.

Indeed, some studies of native Alaskans, who consume a lot of fish, show a higher incidence of hemorrhagic strokes.

1. *JAMA*, Dec. 24, 2002.

Beard Stroking

Here's a rather strange finding from researchers at Bristol University: Men who don't shave every day are more likely to suffer a stroke. This 20-year study of just over 2,400 Welsh men found that 31 percent of the daily shavers died during that period, while 45 percent of those who frequently missed days or rarely shaved passed away. The researchers also noted that the nonshavers enjoyed less sex and more frequently suffered from angina. There are a variety of proposed explanations for the findings, ranging from social status of the subjects, to the levels of circulating testosterone (which may affect cardiovascular health), that influence beard growth and thus, shaving frequency.¹⁴

1. *American Journal of Epidemiology*, February 2003.

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