

DC On Line

Brian Sutton, DC

Growth Hormone Deaths in Critically Ill Patients

Research published in *The New England Journal of Medicine*¹ suggests that large doses of growth hormone given to critically ill patients to stimulate healing may be killing them, contrary to some earlier study conclusions. Two European studies found that the death rate among GH recipients was twice that of patients receiving placebos. While there may be some value for trauma and burn patients, researchers recommended that the practice not be employed in patients recovering from surgery, bacterial infections and gastrointestinal disease.

1. *NEJM*, September 9, 1999.
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Aspirin for Heart Patients Probably Not Beneficial

A British researcher reports that the common practice of prescribing aspirin for patients suffering from congestive heart failure is probably not doing the patients any good. In a study of 279 patients with moderate heart failure, those taking aspirin died at about a 19 percent higher rate than patients not taking it.

Though the lead researcher said the increased mortality was not significant, he said it seemed clear that aspirin didn't offer any benefits to the patients.² The 27-month study also noted that patients taking aspirin were no less likely to experience symptoms, but were more likely to be hospitalized.

2. Dr. John Cleland of the University of Hull, Kingston-upon-Hull, England, reporting to the annual congress of the European Society of Cardiology in Barcelona.
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Exercise and Relaxation More Beneficial for Fibromyalgia than Drugs

Researchers at the University of Missouri (Columbia) analyzed 49 fibromyalgia studies and concluded that exercise, relaxation and other nondrug treatments are more effective than drugs for the condition. Patients are often given antidepressants, muscle relaxants and NSAIDs such as ibuprofen. Patients in nondrug therapies reported fewer pain symptoms and less fatigue. The study is reported in the *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*.³

3. *ABM*, September 1999.

Intelligent Breast-feeding

A new study reinforces the notion that breast-fed babies have a more rapid development of intelligence than bottle-fed babies. Researchers contend that they were able to quantify the relative effects of bonding versus breast milk nutritional content. Overall, they say, an infant breastfed for six months will show a five-point increase in IQ. Sixty percent of this increase can be attributed to nutrients in the mothers' milk, probably docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) and arachidonic acid (AA).⁴ One large infant formula manufacturer says that its own studies did not show any benefit in adding these compounds to formula.⁵

4. *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, November 1999.

5. Associated Press, September 1999.

Protein Leeching Calcium from Bones

Research published in the *American Journal of Physiology*⁶ suggests one mechanism for the contention that high protein diets lead to osteoporosis. According to this work, high-protein foods - especially red meats - form acidic compounds in the body. As people age, the kidneys become less able to maintain normal pH balances under a load. This leads to the minerals in bone acting as a pH buffer, dissolving to counteract the acidity of the bloodstream. Bones will thus tend to lose calcium, phosphorus and other strengthening minerals.

6. *AJP*, November 1999, by Dr. David Bushinsky.

Obesity Accelerates Heart Disease

A group from Duke University Medical Center,⁷ examining data on more than 9,000 heart patients, says that they have quantified the effects of obesity on longevity and heart disease. According to their figures, a moderately obese individual (a body mass index of 25-29) will develop heart disease seven years sooner than a non-obese person. Obesity also takes years off your life: about four years on average for those with a body mass index above 29.

7. Reported by Dr. Eric Eisenstein to the American Heart Association meeting in Atlanta, November 8, 1999.

Exercise Decreases Risk of Gallstones in Women

A report in *The New England Journal of Medicine*⁸ reports that regular exercise decreases the likelihood that a woman will need gall bladder surgery. This study spanned 10 years and collected data

on 60,000 women, 3,200 of which required gall bladder surgery. Researchers say that women who spend at least 30 minutes each day for five days each week can reduce their risk of gall bladder disease by 30 percent. Even if one doesn't engage in a formal exercise program, just moving about seems to help. Women who spent 60 hours per week sitting (while working, driving or watching TV) doubled their incidence of surgery compared to those sitting fewer than six hours.

8. *NEJM*, September 9, 1999.

Melatonin Production Doesn't Decrease with Age

A new study by Harvard Medical School researchers⁹ contradicts a widely held belief that melatonin production naturally decreases as we get older. This work looked at 132 men and women between the ages 18-81. One purported difference in this study (compared to others that suggested decreased production of the hormone) is that the researchers carefully controlled external influences that are known to affect melatonin production. Such things as turning on a light in the middle of the night or changing your bedtime can have an effect. Another factor that can exert a strong influence is the use of medicinal drugs, such as beta-blockers and aspirin, which are doled out in large quantities to the elderly.

After controlling all of these factors, researchers found no difference in melatonin production in the various age groups. This does not mean that melatonin supplementation will not influence the ability to sleep in the elderly, only that if there is a melatonin deficiency, it is probably due to some external factor.

9. *American Journal of Medicine*, November 5, 1999.

How to Prevent Heart Disease

Would you like to reduce your chances of suffering from heart disease (including heart attacks, congestive heart failure and strokes) by 82 percent? It is possible, according to a new Harvard University study.¹⁰ This conclusion is drawn from data obtained from 84,000 women participating in the Harvard Nurses Study from 1980 to 1994, and presumably translates to similar benefits in men.

The secret, say researchers, is in following a not-so-secret lifestyle that includes no smoking; keeping your weight down; 30 minutes of moderate to vigorous exercise each day; one alcoholic beverage every couple of days; and eating healthy foods. Women who lived this lifestyle were 82 percent less likely to suffer from cardiovascular related problems than the average woman in the study. That's the good news; the bad news is that only about one percent of women follow all of these rules.

10. Presented to the American Heart Association meeting in Atlanta, November 9, 1999.

Hypertension Preventive

Researchers from the State University of New York in Buffalo report that people can head off dangerous blood pressure increases derived from stress by getting a pet. In a study of 48 stockbrokers who were already on high blood pressure medication, researchers tested blood pressure fluctuations while asking the subjects to calm down a client who had just lost a large sum of money after bad advice from the stockbroker. They found that the blood pressure surges were cut in half in those patients who had a cat or a dog nearby. They tried a similar experiment using a spouse instead of a pet, but report no such benefit - and perhaps even a worsening of the stress response.¹¹

11. Reported to a meeting of the American Heart Association in Atlanta, November 7, 1999, by Karen Allen and Dr. Joseph Izzo.

Home Is Where the Heart (Patient) Is

An Australian researcher reports that congestive heart failure patients fare much better if they can be treated at home instead of in a hospital setting. Their study of 200 patients concludes that home care is half the cost, produces a much better quality of life, and better statistical results. After six months, 51 percent of the home care patients were judged "healthy" compared to 38 percent of those under hospital care. Also, deaths were more prevalent in the hospital setting.¹²

12. Reuters, November 7, 1999 reporting on the work of Simon Stewart of the University of Adelaide.

Measles Resistance Diminishing

A new, small-scale study published in *Pediatrics*¹³ confirms what many have suspected for years: that as time goes on, newborn babies are becoming more susceptible to the measles virus. The reason is that the measles vaccine produces a much milder immune response in future mothers than the infection. Because of this, babies no longer get antibodies from their mothers, if the mother had received the vaccine but not contracted a full-blown case of measles. Researchers found that an infant born after the vaccine was licensed in 1963 is 7.5 times more likely to contract the illness before the baby itself is vaccinated. These results are being pointed to as a reason to boost vaccination programs and to have the shots given as early as possible.

13. *Pediatrics*, November 1, 1999.

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