

Medical tidbits

By W. GIFFORD-JONES, M.D.

Take your melatonin in a glass of Merlot

During long plane flights, I always ask for a glass of wine with dinner. Wine helps me to catnap and relieve the boredom of night travel.

Why does red wine cause drowsiness? In the past, we understood that melatonin, a soporific, was only produced by mammals. Now, a report in the *Journal of the Science of Food and Agriculture* claims that melatonin is also produced by plants. Italian scientists report that the skin of grapes used to make red wine contains high levels of melatonin. So enjoy your merlot or cabernet sauvignon for relaxation and sleep.



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Obesity: A threat to U. S. security?

The U.S. Army won the Battle of the Bulge 60 years ago. However, Major General Thomas Bostick says tens of thousands of army recruits are being rejected due to obesity. This comes at a time when the army is struggling to meet recruiting quotas.

Bostick's solution? He says there should be an army-run fat camp for new recruits that would include a strict dietary and fitness program.

This is sad commentary on the state of young people when 30 percent of recruits are unfit for military service and another 30 percent need to lose weight before being accepted. Luckily for the United States, its enemies are also facing the battle of the bulge. All countries need a major wake-up call to stop this insidious epidemic.

Do CT scans increase the risk of cancer from radiation?

The *New England Journal of Medicine* reports that the increased use of CT scans with higher doses of radiation means that the general population is receiving a marked increase in radiation exposure. It states that at the moment, the risk is not large, but is measurable. Diagnostic procedures that require CT scans are necessary, but there's reason to suspect that some are not needed. And down the road, I believe increased exposure to radiation will result in adverse results for some patients.

A surprising new way to prevent osteoporosis

A report from Tufts University shows there's much more to having healthy bones than taking calcium, vitamin D, and exercising. Researchers at the Human Nutrition Research Center on Aging studied the BMD (bone mineral density) of 344 men and 540 women. They also investigated their intake of vitamin C from food and supplements, for four years. Men taking 250 milligrams of vitamin C daily had less bone loss.

Most people do not know that vitamin C plays a vital role in the formation of collagen, which constitutes 90 percent of bone matrix. Moreover, vitamin C, like quercetin, is an antioxidant, and this also helps to protect bone from the stress of aging.

Cranberry extract may decrease risk of colon cancer.

Studies show that nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) are associated with a

decreased risk of colon cancer. Now researchers report that cranberry extracts may have the same effect. In the study, colon cancer cells were exposed to cranberry extract, and like NSAIDs, cranberry extract also triggered an anti-inflammatory response.

Further research is needed to see if cranberry extract will help to decrease the number of people dying of large bowel malignancies. Since writing about how effective Cranberry Women's Formula is in decreasing the risk of recurrent urinary infections, I continue to get inquiries about it. For more information see the Website fruitessentials.com or call the toll-free number (877) 328-3784.

Eat apples to prevent brain damage



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damage

The old saying 'An apple a day keeps the doctor away' needs an upgrade. Researchers at Cornell University suggest that an antioxidant, quercetin, which occurs in apples, helps to protect against brain damage. Antioxidants remove free radicals, the garbage that's left over after food is metabolized by the body.

Dr. C.Y. Lee, food science professor at Cornell, says that the highest levels of quercetin are found in the apple skins. So drinking apple juice is not the best source of this antioxidant. Moreover, red apples have higher levels of quercetin than yellow or green ones. Quercetin is also present in blueberries, cranberries, and onions.

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Heartburn drugs raise risk of hip fractures

CHICAGO (Reuters)—Even short-term use of popular acid-reducing heartburn drugs may raise the risk of hip fractures, U.S. researchers said on June 1.

The increased risks appeared two years after patients started taking proton pump inhibitors such as Takeda Pharmaceutical Company's Prevacid and histamine-2 receptor antagonists, or H2RAs, such as GlaxoSmithKline's Zantac, researchers at Kaiser Permanente San Francisco told the Digestive Disease Week meeting in Chicago.

Other proton pump inhibitors include AstraZeneca's Nexium and Prilosec, Wyeth's Protonix, and Eisai Company Ltd's Aciphex.

A study in August's *Canadian Medical Association Journal* suggested long-term use of proton pump inhibitors for at least five years may raise the risk of hip fractures.

Dr. Douglas Corley, who led the study, said in a statement, "The increased risk with short-term use of acid-suppressing drugs suggests that even relatively brief periods of use may be associated with increased risk of hip fractures."

He said patients taking acid blockers should continue treatment at the lowest effective dose, but people at risk of osteoporosis should talk to their doctor about other treatment options.

For the study, Corley and colleagues analyzed data on nearly 40,000 patients taking acid-reducing drugs, and compared them to more than 130,000 patients not taking the drugs.

Patients who had hip fractures were 30 percent more likely to have taken proton pump inhibitors for at least two years, and 18 percent more likely to have taken H2RAs for at least two years.

Risks were lower in people who had taken lower doses.

Those who took less than one pill a day had a 12 percent increase in fracture risk. Patients who took one pill per day had a 30 percent increased risk, while those who took more than one pill a day had a 41 percent higher risk.

People aged 50 to 59 who had been on proton pump inhibitors for more than two years had the biggest increase in fracture risk with taking the drugs, they said.



SUN THERAPY: A new way to treat psoriasis. PHOTOS.COM

Sunlight healing for psoriasis

By DR. JOHN BRIFFA

Vitamin D is made in the skin in response to sunlight, so one question we might ask is whether vitamin D might also somehow promote skin health. One piece of indirect evidence that supports this concept relates to the experience that many sufferers of the skin condition psoriasis have in the sun.

Psoriasis is characterized by raised, red, usually scaly skin "plaques" (often on the knees, elbows, and scalp). Quite often, these can improve considerably and may even disappear when exposed to sunlight.

Psoriasis is thought to be caused by the excessive proliferation of cells in the outer layer of skin known as keratinocytes. Vitamin D regulates a large number of genes in the keratinocytes, which means that vitamin D might have a role to play in the regulation of the division of these cells. Compounds related to

vitamin D (vitamin D "analogues," such as calcipotriol) are sometimes used to treat psoriasis.

I was interested to read a recent study regarding the effect of sunlight on psoriasis. Twenty Swedish men and women (average age 47) were taken for a three-week break in Gran Canaria [1].

The severity of psoriasis in this group was measured using the Psoriasis Area and Severity Index (PASI). Over the course of their time on Gran Canaria, PASI scores declined an average of about 73 percent. There was no control group (a similar group not sunning themselves in Gran Canaria to compare with these results). Nevertheless, these results are impressive and add at least some scientific support for the anecdotal experiences of many psoriasis sufferers.

This study not only looked at individual's responses to sunlight. The researchers also measured vitamin D levels. At the beginning

of the study, the average vitamin D was 57.2 nmol/l (22.9 ng/ml). At the end of the study, levels had risen to an average of 104.5 nmol/l (41.8 ng/ml) a rise of almost 83 percent.

This study demonstrates that sun exposure really does have the capacity to improve psoriasis. Sufferers will be generally glad of this relief, not only because the condition can be unsightly, but also because it can be uncomfortable. For instance, the plaques can crack and bleed.

The study also shows that sunlight exposure can dramatically enhance vitamin D levels. It should be borne in mind that the study subjects were from Sweden and are likely to have had fair skin because more vitamin D is made in fair skin in response to a given amount of sunlight than in darker skin.

Finally, sunlight appeared to lead to positive changes in the biochemistry of these individuals regarding blood fat and blood sugar levels.

People who go on holiday in sunnier climes very often report feeling better at the end of it. For many, getting away from one's routine and perhaps hectic, stressful life at home has a part to play. However, it does seem that, through the action of sunlight, one of the reasons that people feel healthier at the end of a holiday is because they are healthier. It seems to me that there really is such a thing as a healthy tan.

Reference:
1. Osmanovic A, et al. Effect of climate therapy at Gran Canaria on vitamin D production, blood glucose and lipids in patients with psoriasis. Journal of the European Academy of Dermatology and Venereology. April 24, 2009 [Epub ahead of print publication]

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Pregnancy guidelines impact obese women

WASHINGTON (Reuters)—Obese women can safely gain just a small amount of weight when pregnant, but doctors need to do more to help women stay slim before they get pregnant. U.S. policy advisers said on May 28.

Women who are obese should gain about 11 to 20 pounds while pregnant, the Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council panel said in new guidelines.

"It had become clear that heavier women could gain less weight and still deliver an infant of good size," the report said.

With two-thirds of the population overweight or obese, the panel said, it is clear that new pregnancy guidelines must be geared toward heavier women.

"In our population today, more women of reproductive age are severely obese (8 percent) than are underweight (3 percent), and their

short- and long-term health has become a concern, in addition to the size of the infant at birth," the report reads.

Women of healthy weight or who are slightly overweight can gain the standard recommended amounts, said Kathleen Rasmussen, professor of nutrition at Cornell University in New York, who chaired the committee that wrote the report.

Healthy women of normal body mass index or BMI a measure of height to weight should gain 25 to 35 pounds during pregnancy, the same as recommended when the guidelines were last updated in 1990.

Overweight women should gain 15 to 25 pounds. BMI is accepted globally as a good measure of

whether someone is overweight. A 5-foot-6-inch woman weighing between 115 and 154 pounds has a normal BMI, according to an online calculator at nhlbisupport.com/bmi/.

Body mass index

A BMI of over 25 is considered overweight, while a BMI of 30 or more reflecting 33 percent or more body fat makes a person obese.

The report said doctors should record a woman's weight, height, and BMI routinely before conception, throughout pregnancy, and after.

Women who gain too much weight while pregnant not only risk keeping that weight after they have the baby, but also have high-

er rates of some pregnancy complications, including high blood pressure and gestational diabetes.

"Preeclampsia is about twice as prevalent among overweight, and about three times as prevalent among obese women, as it is among normal weight women," the report said. This dangerous condition can kill a pregnant woman. The World Health Organization estimates that preeclampsia kills 500,000 babies a year globally.

"More women are already obese when they become pregnant. Based on data from the Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System, one-fifth of American women are obese at the start of pregnancy, a figure that has risen 70 percent in the last decade," the report reads.



NORMAL BMI: A woman with a normal body mass index is allowed to gain 25 to 35 pounds during pregnancy. PHOTOS.COM



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Less Nutrition in Modern (Conventional) Veggies

"If you're still not buying the whole "organic-is-better" argument, this study might convince you otherwise. As Davis points out, more than three billion people around the world suffer from malnourishment and yet, ironically, efforts to increase food production have actually produced food that is less nourishing. Fruits seem to be less affected by genetic and environmental dilution, but one can't help but wonder how nutritionally bankrupt veggies can be avoided."

From The Skimmer, Time magazine



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