



Research Update • Le point sur la recherche

In the news . . .

HRT ineffective in secondary prevention of heart disease

A study involving postmenopausal women with established heart disease shows that hormone replacement therapy with estrogen plus progestin has no effect on the risk of heart attack or death due to coronary artery disease (*JAMA* 1998;280:605-13). The results from this randomized, placebo-controlled trial refute findings from earlier observational studies that showed a benefit for prevention of heart disease. The authors conclude that women should not begin hormone replacement therapy solely in hopes of preventing heart disease.

Trying to conceive? Avoid alcohol

As little as 1 to 5 drinks a week can affect a woman's chances of conceiving, a study conducted among Danish couples has revealed (*BMJ* 1998;317:505-10). After taking into account factors such as smoking and body-mass index, the study showed that women who had 1 to 5 drinks a week had a fertility rate only two-thirds that of women who did not drink. For women drinking 10 or more drinks a week, the fertility rate was only about a third of that in abstainers. The authors suggest that physicians advise women who wish to become pregnant to avoid alcohol entirely.

Spermicide of no value in preventing infection

The proven spermicide nonoxynol 9 does not prevent microbial transmission of HIV infection, gonorrhea or

chlamydia, a randomized, placebo-controlled trial involving prostitutes in Cameroon has determined (*N Engl J Med* 1998;339:504-10). The more than 1000 HIV-negative prostitutes were given either a nonoxynol-9 or placebo film to insert in the vagina before sex. Rates of infection with common sexually transmitted diseases in the 2 groups were almost identical.

Canadians study croup treatment

The glucocorticoid dexamethasone is the best available treatment for croup in children, although budesonide also reduces the need for treatment, a study conducted in Canadian hospitals has found (*N Engl J Med* 1998;339:498-503.) The randomized trial compared intramuscularly administered dexamethasone with budesonide, which is delivered through a nebulizer, and with a placebo. All were administered after initial treatment with racepinephrine.

Pancreatitis related to cystic-fibrosis gene

Two studies have found that patients with pancreatitis are likely to have a mutation of the gene that causes cystic fibrosis. In one study, 37% of patients with chronic idiopathic pancreatitis had 1 abnormal allele of the *CFTR* gene, and 3 patients had 2 abnormal alleles (*N Engl J Med* 1998;339:653-8). The other study found that 13% of patients with chronic pancreatitis had 1 abnormal allele, and no patients had 2 abnormal alleles (*N Engl J Med* 1998;339:645-52). These rates of genetic abnormality are much higher than in the general population, suggesting that some cases of pancreatitis have a genetic basis.

"White-coat" hypertension associated with left ventricular hypertrophy

Recent research has identified the phenomenon of "white-coat" hypertension — blood pressure that becomes elevated only when a doctor is taking blood pressure measurements. Now a study has shown that white-coat hypertension can be a sign of left ventricular hypertrophy (*BMJ* 1998;317:565-70). Scientists in Germany compared blood pressure measurements obtained by technicians and by doctors in more than 1600 subjects and found that those whose pressure was high when they were tested by doctors had increased left ventricular mass and increased prevalence of left ventricular hypertrophy.



Sunlight and cataracts

Although it was well known that occupational exposure to ultraviolet-B radiation increases the risk of cataracts, no relation between cataracts and sunlight exposure had been scientifically proven. A new epidemiologic study shows that older people — men and women, black and white — are slightly more likely to have cortical opacity with increasing exposure to sunlight (*JAMA* 1998;280:714-8). Hence, protecting eyes from the sun with a hat or sunglasses should help prevent cataracts.