

What's New on the Heart Beat?

With Heart Month just around the corner in February, here's our annual roundup from the American Heart Association's Scientific Sessions — the world's largest meeting on cardiovascular medicine and health **Pat Rich**

JOYSTICK WORKOUTS

Playing the right type of video game can actually help you keep fit, according to Japanese researchers from the Project for Physical Activity in the Health Promotion and Exercise Program of the National Institute of Health and Nutrition in Tokyo. They found that about one-third of the virtual physical activities performed with the Wii sports or Wii fit video games used enough energy to qualify as moderate-intensity exercise — that is, expending at least 3.0 metabolic equivalent values (METs). The finding emerged from an analysis of 12 adult volunteers, ages 25 to 44, who performed the activities in an airtight metabolic chamber that allowed researchers to assess their energy expenditure in an environment that mimics the measuring-apparatus-free setting of the home.

Wii sports games are based on boxing, tennis, golf, baseball and bowling. Wii fit exercises include yoga, aerobics and balance and strength training. “The range of energy expenditure in these active games is sufficient to prevent or improve obesity and lifestyle-related disease,” says Dr. Motohiko Miyachi, lead author of the study and project leader. The activities that used the most energy were the boxing game on the Wii sports and the single-arm stand on the Wii fit, according to the study, which was funded by the games' maker, Nintendo.

DEFICIENCY LINKED TO CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE

Two studies have shown that a lack of vitamin D is associated with both an increased risk of death and cardiovascular disease (CVD) in older subjects with no history of CVD — as well as an increased rate of depression in those who do have heart disease. Both studies were conducted at the Intermountain Medical Center at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City. One study compared blood vitamin D levels in 27,686 individuals with no history of CVD. Those with very low levels of the vitamin were 77% more likely to die from any cause, 45% more likely to develop CVD, 78% more likely to have a stroke, and twice as likely to suffer heart failure than those with normal vitamin D levels (over 30 nanograms per millilitre of blood).

In the second study, vitamin D blood levels were measured in 8,680 people ages 50 and older who had been diagnosed with CVD. Of those with very low levels of the vitamin, 32% were depressed compared with 21% of subjects with normal levels. The trend was noted even in those with no history of depression.

According to Dr. Heidi May, an epidemiologist who participated in both studies, the findings suggest that vitamin D levels should be monitored more



aggressively and that low levels should be treated. While the study does not establish a definite link between vitamin D and heart disease or depression, studies have shown that vitamin D regulates key functions such as blood pressure, inflammation and glucose control, all of which are related to heart disease. D deficiency has already been associated with musculoskeletal disorders, cancer and Alzheimer's disease. This hormone-like nutrient is produced from a cholesterol-like substance in skin cells upon exposure to the sun's ultraviolet rays. In the diet, it is found in fatty fish, egg yolk, liver, lean beef, fortified milk and multivitamin supplements.

ALERT AND ALIVE WITH VEGGIES

Seniors ages 70 and older who eat three or more servings of vegetables daily lower their risk of heart disease by almost one-third and reduce their risk of death from any cause by 15% compared with those who eat fewer servings. And those consuming more servings of vegetables and fruits also have a significantly lower risk of mental impairment. These findings come from an analysis of a large U.S. survey of adults ages 70 and older and still living in the community setting. The

Longitudinal Study of Aging recruited almost 5,000 individuals between 1994 and 1996, asked them about their diets and measured their cognitive abilities.

It then followed these subjects for about seven years until the end of 2002 to see if there was any association between their diets, mental function and risk of dying or developing heart disease. The positive impact of eating more vegetables and fruits was seen even after taking into account other health-related factors. The study was conducted at the Drexel University School of Public Health and the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine in Philadelphia.

DAIRY PHOSPHORUS LOWERS BLOOD PRESSURE

People who consume more dietary phosphorus have a lower risk of developing high blood pressure. That's the conclusion of an analysis of the impact of dietary phosphorus on blood pressure in more than 10,000 individuals without known heart disease or hypertension. This association was seen only with the phosphorus consumed in dairy products (as opposed

to phosphorus from red meat, fish and cereals), leading the researchers to note that “our findings suggest a benefit from either dairy phosphorus, other nutrients in dairy products or dairy products as a whole.” The phosphorus effect was somewhat weakened when the investigators took into account other nutrients found in dairy products such as calcium, potassium and magnesium. Conducted at several U.S. centres, the study was headed by epidemiologist Dr. Alvaro Alonso of the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis and funded by the U.S. National Institutes of Health.



HARDENING OF THE ARTERIES — AN ANCIENT DISEASE

The grain-, fruit- and fish-rich diet of the ancient Egyptians was not enough to protect them from arterial disease. A unique collaboration between imaging experts and Egyptologists has found hardening of the arteries in 3,500-year-old mummies. The finding shows that atherosclerosis — the buildup of obstructive deposits in the arteries — is a condition caused not only by modern habits such as inactivity and high fat consumption. The

study used computed X-ray tomography (CT) scans to examine 22 mummies in Cairo’s National Museum of Antiquities. It documented a definite buildup of calcium in the inner walls of blood vessels in five mummies in

which the blood vessels or part of the heart could be scanned. It also found evidence of probable buildup in four other mummies in which the researchers were able to scan the area where the blood vessels used to be.

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