

INTERNATIONAL HEALTH NEWS

Your Gateway to Better Health!

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Editorial

After almost ten years of keeping abreast of new developments in the health field I have reached two conclusions.

The overwhelming majority of our health problems are caused by our own actions or those of our fellow man.

Natural remedies and traditional eating practices are powerful means of preventing and treating our ailments.

The findings that man-made margarine is bad for the heart, that amalgam fillings are toxic, that excessive consumption of french fries is the main cause of obesity, that aluminum-containing food additives are strongly linked to Alzheimer's disease, that smoking causes cancer and heart disease, that pesticide exposure may cause Parkinson's disease, that ear piercing may cause allergies, that sunscreen use is linked to melanoma and sun avoidance to cancer, and that the misuse of pharmaceutical drugs kills hundreds of thousands of people every year are just a few examples of how we are 'doing it to ourselves'.

Fortunately, there is now increasing evidence that simple dietary changes can have a profound impact on our health. In this issue we report on the importance of getting enough essential fatty acids in the diet. The Mediterranean diet is known for its heart protective effect which is believed to be tied in with its high content of alpha-linolenic acid. Research reports from around the world report that fish oils (tissue oils - not liver oils) are highly effective in preventing and treating depression, arrhythmias, heart attacks, diabetes, breast cancer, and arthritis. Two servings of oily fish (salmon, mackerel or herring) per week, 2-4 grams of fish oil capsules per day or 15-30 ml of flaxseed oil per day is highly recommended as a good way to optimize your health.

There is no doubt that Hippocrates had it right 2400 years ago when he said "Let food be your medicine and your medicine be your food."

Hans R. Larsen, Editor

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

I always have high blood pressure - about 140/160. I am stressed now because I have a difficult job. I work for a foreign tax department in Brazil. I usually have dizziness. I'd like to receive more information about blood pressure.

Afonso, Brazil

Editor: Yes, stress will certainly increase blood pressure so your first step should be to try to relax more and to find a stress relaxation technique that works for you. Diet is equally important and there are many supplements which will also help you to lower your blood pressure naturally. See our website at <http://www.com/healthnews/hypertension.html> for more information.

I have been taking bovine capsules 3 times a day for a month. I now read that it may contribute to the growth of cancer. Should I continue to take them or is it really too dangerous?

Caroline, USA

Editor: You did not specify what kind of bovine capsules you are taking so it is hard to advise you. If they contain bovine growth hormone or growth hormone enhancers I would definitely not take them. However, if they are based on colostrum from organically-farmed cows (ie. no BHT injections) they would probably be OK. In any case, taking them for a month or two would be unlikely to cause any long term damage.

I read your article on coenzyme Q10. I am 75 years old and feel 100% healthy apart from

having cancer of the prostate. I have had radiation, but my PSA reading is now going up again. My GP suggested that I take 200 mg of Q10 and 100 micrograms of selenium daily. Do you think this will help?

George, UK

Editor: I am sorry to hear about your battle with prostate cancer. I have not seen anything in the medical literature indicating that coenzyme Q10 acts to prevent or treat prostate cancer. However, I personally feel that it is quite likely it would work. Research carried out in Denmark has shown that coenzyme Q10 is highly effective in the treatment of breast cancer. As prostate and breast cancer have many similarities I should think that Q10 might work for prostate cancer as well. Selenium, of course, is also important and a dosage of 200 micrograms per day is considered quite safe. You could probably take 300 mg of Q10 per day. Make sure you take it with a bit of oil (1 teaspoon of olive oil or fresh-pressed flaxseed oil) as it is much better absorbed this way. Relatively large amounts of vitamin C (500 mg 3 times a day) and vitamin E (400-800 IU of **natural** vitamin E) would probably also be beneficial as would a lycopene or beta-carotene supplement. You may also want to try the herbal remedy PC-SPES which has been found to inhibit the growth of prostate cancer cells.

Oil and vinegar dressing is good for the heart

BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS. Researchers at the Harvard Medical School report that women who use oil and vinegar salad dressing more than five to six times a week have half the risk of dying from a fatal heart attack than do women who rarely use this salad dressing. Their finding is part of a major study involving over 76,000 women aged between 30 and 55 years when the study began in 1976. During 10 years of follow-up 232 women died from ischemic heart disease and 597 suffered a non-fatal heart attack (myocardial infarction). The researchers found that women who consumed an average of 0.71 grams/day of alpha-linolenic acid had twice the risk of dying from heart disease than did women

who consumed 1.36 grams/day on the average. The beneficial effects of a high alpha-linolenic acid intake was particularly pronounced among women who also supplemented with vitamin E. These women had a 64 per cent lower risk of fatal heart disease than did women who did not supplement and had a lower intake of alpha-linolenic acid. Women with a low intake of *trans*-fatty acids (found in margarine) and a high intake of alpha-linolenic acid were found to have a 61 per cent lower risk of fatal heart disease than did women with a high intake of *trans*-fatty acids and a low intake of alpha-linolenic acid. The researchers conclude that alpha-linolenic acid (found in flax and hemp oils) reduces heart

disease mortality through its antiarrhythmic effects and its ability to prevent the formation of blood clots. A high intake of alpha-linolenic acid had little effect on the incidence of non-fatal heart attacks.

Dr. William Connor of the Oregon Health Sciences University points out that alpha-linolenic acid is converted to eicosapentaenoic acid and docosahexaenoic acid in the body. Both of these fatty acids (the main components of fish oils) have been found to reduce the incidence of cardiac arrhythmias (a common

cause of sudden cardiac death) and to prevent blood clotting. He suggests that eating more fish or taking fish oil supplements may be a more direct way of obtaining protection against fatal heart disease.

Hu, Frank B., et al. Dietary intake of alpha-linolenic acid and risk of fatal ischemic heart disease among women. American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, Vol. 69, May 1999, pp. 890-97

Connor, William E. Alpha-linolenic acid in health and disease. American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, Vol. 69, May 1999, p. 827 (editorial)

Benefits of essential fatty acids

HONOLULU, HAWAII. Dr. Joseph Pepping, a consulting pharmacist at the Kaiser Permanente, provides a comprehensive review of the many benefits of omega-3 fatty acids and their derivatives. He cites evidence that eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) which are found in fish oils are helpful in the prevention and treatment of cardiovascular disease, arrhythmias, diabetes, breast cancer, and arthritis. While EPA is readily synthesized in the body from alpha-linolenic acid (found in flaxseed oil) Dr. Pepping states that the synthesis of DHA is much more difficult and that DHA must be obtained directly from fish, certain algae or green, leafy vegetables. He also points out that the body's optimal balance between omega-6 (linoleic) and omega-3 (linolenic) fatty acids is a 2:1 to 4:1 ratio. Unfortunately, the typical Western diet contains these acids in ratios of 20:1 to 25:1. An excess of omega-6 fatty acids can lead to formation of blood clots, allergic and inflammatory disorders, and the accelerated growth of certain cancer cells. Dr. Pepping recommends two servings of cold-water fish (e.g. salmon, mackerel or herring) per week, 2-4

grams of fish oil capsules per day or 15-30 ml of flaxseed oil per day as a preventive measure. He points out that it is important to add 200 IU of vitamin E to the daily diet if supplementing with fish oils. He also advises caution regarding fish oil supplementation in patients taking warfarin, heparin, low-molecular weight heparin, ticlopidine or clopidogrel.

In a related article Dr. Emanuel Severus of the Berlin University points out that major depression is characterized by a deficiency of omega-3 fatty acids and that these acids possess powerful antiarrhythmic properties. He suggests that the missing link in the recently established association between major depression and sudden cardiac death may be the omega-3 fatty acid deficiency which characterizes both conditions.

Pepping, Joseph. Omega-3 essential fatty acids. American Journal of Health-System Pharmacy, Vol. 56, April 15, 1999, pp. 719-24

Severus, W. Emanuel, et al. Omega-3 fatty acids: the missing link? Archives of General Psychiatry, Vol. 56, April 1999, pp. 380-81 (letter to the editor)

Fish oils reverse atherosclerosis

MUNICH, GERMANY. German medical researchers have just released the results of a major study which proves that fish oil supplementation is highly beneficial to patients suffering from atherosclerosis. Their randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled

clinical trial involved 162 patients with confirmed atherosclerosis. Half the patients were given six grams of fish oils per day for three months while the other half were given six grams per day of placebo capsules containing a fatty acid composition resembling that of the average

European diet. After three months the dosages were reduced to three grams/day for a further 21 months. Angiograms were taken at the start of the trial and at the end of the two-year study period. At the end of the treatment twice as many of the patients in the fish oil group (16) showed regression of their atherosclerotic deposits when compared to the placebo group. Three patients in the placebo group suffered a non-fatal heart attack during the 2-year period as compared to only one in the fish oil group. All told there were seven patients in the placebo

group who had a cardiovascular event (heart attack or stroke) as compared to only two in the fish oil group. The researchers conclude that fish oil supplementation is beneficial for atherosclerosis patients and is safe and well-tolerated. NOTE: This study was partially funded by Pronova A.S., a Norwegian fish oil producer.

von Schacky, Clemens, et al. The effect of dietary omega-3 fatty acids on coronary atherosclerosis. Annals of Internal Medicine, Vol. 130, April 6, 1999, pp. 554-62

Vitamin C and kidney stones

SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA. Concern has been expressed, particularly among opponents to vitamin supplementation, that high levels of vitamin C (ascorbic acid) intake may have potential adverse effects such as vitamin B12 deficiency, iron overload, and kidney stones. Researchers at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center have just concluded a major study aimed at investigating these concerns. Their study involved over 10,000 participants aged 20 to 74 years. The researchers found no correlation between vitamin B12 deficiency and blood levels of vitamin C. As a matter of fact people with high vitamin C levels also had high vitamin B12 levels. There also was no correlation between serum ferritin (iron) levels in men and their vitamin C levels. However, among women there was some correlation between high vitamin C

levels and high iron levels prompting the researchers to warn that women with a genetic susceptibility to iron overload should consider moderating their vitamin C intake. No association was found between high vitamin C levels and the risk of developing kidney stones. As a matter of fact among men a higher vitamin C level was highly correlated with a significantly lower risk of kidney stones. NOTE: This study was supported in part by Hoffmann-LaRoche, a major manufacturer of pharmaceuticals and vitamins.

Simon, Joel A. and Hudes, Esther S. Relation of serum ascorbic acid to serum vitamin B12, serum ferritin, and kidney stones in US adults. Archives of Internal Medicine, Vol. 159, March 22, 1999, pp. 619-24

Aluminum and Alzheimer's disease

SYRACUSE, NEW YORK. There has long been concern that a high intake of aluminum is associated with an increased risk for Alzheimer's disease (AD). Research so far has focused on the effect of drinking water which may contain from 0.1 to 0.2 mg of aluminum per liter. Studies have shown that drinking aluminum-contaminated water may double AD risk. Now researchers at the State University of New York provide convincing evidence that aluminum-containing foods constitute a much greater risk than does drinking water. Their study involved 23 patients (average age of 73 years) with newly diagnosed AD. The patients were matched for

sex and age with controls without AD. The participants' intake of aluminum-containing foods over the previous five years was determined through interviews with the participants' spouses or daughters. The researchers found that people who consumed aluminum-containing foods on a regular basis had double the risk of AD than did people who did not consume such foods on a regular basis. Adjusting for body mass index, daily energy intake, education, and intake of vitamins A, C and E yielded an odds ratio of 8.6, ie. an 8.6-fold increase in risk. Storing, baking or cooking food in aluminum containers was associated with a 32-fold increase in adjusted

risk whereas consumption of chocolate pudding, chocolate milk shake or hot chocolate was associated with a 78-fold increase in risk. Other foods associated with a very substantial increase in the risk of developing AD were pancakes, waffles, biscuits, muffins, cornbread, corn tortillas, doughnuts, cookies, American cheese, salt, and chewing gum. The culprit in baked products is probably alum baking powder,

but other aluminum compounds are used extensively in processed foods. The researchers conclude that aluminum-containing foods could be a major factor in the Alzheimer's "epidemic" and urge large scale studies.

Rogers, Mary A.M. and Simon, David G. A preliminary study of dietary aluminium intake and risk of Alzheimer's disease. Age and Ageing, Vol. 28, March 1999, pp. 205-09

Hip fracture linked to vitamin D deficiency

BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS. It is estimated that between 26 and 38 million Americans suffer from osteoporosis which often leads to hip fractures. It is becoming increasingly clear that this "epidemic" of osteoporosis is intimately linked to a widespread vitamin D deficiency. About 90 per cent of our vitamin D requirement is normally provided by sunlight-catalyzed conversion of pro-vitamin D to vitamin D in the skin. However, the efficiency of this conversion declines with age, sun avoidance, and excessive use of sunscreens. Researchers at the Brigham and Women's Hospital now report clear evidence that women suffering hip fractures are vitamin D deficient. Their study involved 30 women with acute hip fractures and 68 women who were admitted for elective joint replacement (17 of these had osteoporosis). The researchers found that women with acute hip fractures had significantly lower levels of 25-

hydroxyvitamin D and higher levels of parathyroid hormone in their blood than did the women admitted for elective surgery. Fifty per cent of the women admitted with acute hip fracture had a vitamin D level low enough (less than 30 nmol/L) to be officially classified as vitamin D deficient. The researchers suggest that supplementation with vitamin D and suppression of parathyroid hormone may reduce future fracture risk and help the healing of the existing fracture. They conclude that vitamin D deficiency among the elderly is entirely preventable and recommend supplementation with 800 IU/day of vitamin D plus calcium especially in northern latitudes.

LeBoff, Meryl S., et al. Occult vitamin D deficiency in postmenopausal US women with acute hip fracture. Journal of the American Medical Association, Vol. 281, April 28, 1999, pp. 1505-11

Carbohydrates and heart disease

LONDON, UNITED KINGDOM. High blood levels of high-density cholesterol (HDL) are beneficial and associated with a lower risk of heart disease. Unfortunately, low fat diets which are high in carbohydrates tend to decrease the level of HDL and may therefore be somewhat counterproductive in the prevention of heart disease. Medical researchers at the Hammersmith Hospital in London now report that not all carbohydrates decrease HDL levels. The researchers discovered that the glycemic index of the carbohydrates is the factor which determines the direction of the HDL change. The glycemic index of a food is a measure of how rapidly it raises insulin production and

glucose level of the blood. Pure glucose has a glycemic index of 100, white bread 73, white rice 42, instant rice 68, potatoes 64, corn flakes 63, and apples 28. Carrots and bananas also have high glycemic indices whereas slow-cooked oats, beans, peas, spaghetti, barley, cherries, apples, and plums have low glycemic indices. The British researchers carried out a study involving 721 women and 699 men (mean age of 40 years) to determine the relationship between the glycemic index of their diet and HDL cholesterol levels. They concluded that among women those consuming a low glycemic index diet had an average HDL level which was 0.25 mmol/L higher than the level among

women consuming a high glycemic index diet. This increase in HDL levels corresponds to a decrease in heart disease risk of 29 per cent. The effect for men was significantly less with only a 0.09 mmol/L difference in HDL levels and a 7 per cent decrease in heart disease risk. Low glycemic index diets have also been found

beneficial in the treatment of obesity and type 2 diabetes.

Frost, G., et al. Glycaemic index as a determinant of serum HDL-cholesterol concentration. The Lancet, Vol. 353, March 27, 1999, pp. 1045-48

Katan, Martijn B. Are there good and bad carbohydrates for HDL cholesterol? The Lancet, Vol. 353, March 27, 1999, pp. 1029-30 (commentary)

Ginger and turmeric fight cancer

KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA. Ginger, turmeric and other members of the Zingiberaceae family of rhizomes have a long history of use in Malaysian traditional medicine. Ginger, for example, is widely used in the treatment of stomach problems, nausea, vomiting, epilepsy, sore throat, cough, bruises, wounds, childbirth, sore eyes, liver complaints, rheumatism, asthma, and many other disorders. Researchers at the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia now report that several members of the Zingiberaceae family effectively block the promotion of cancerous tumors. They tested 11 different species and found that seven of them had strong anti-tumor properties. Their test involved a short term assay of the inhibitory effect of extracts of the rhizomes (roots) on human cancer cells. They found that turmeric (*Curcuma domestica*) extracts (turmeric root

extracted with petroleum ether, chloroform or ethanol) completely inhibited further growth of the cancer cells. Ginger (*Zingiber officinale*) extracts, especially the chloroform extract, also inhibited further growth, but the concentration of extract was more critical than for the turmeric extracts. The researchers conclude that turmeric, ginger and other Zingiberaceae rhizomes may be useful in preventing the promotion of cancer and that populations with high risks of cancer should be encouraged to include them in their diet. Further work is now underway to isolate the active components in the plants.

Vimala, S., et al. Anti-tumour promoter activity in Malaysian ginger rhizobia used in traditional medicine. British Journal of Cancer, Vol. 80, No. 1/2, April 1999, pp. 110-16

Drug-induced parkinsonism is common

ROCHESTER, MINNESOTA. Parkinsonism is a common neurodegenerative disease; its main symptom being a pronounced tremor affecting the extremities notably the hands, chin or lips. Other characteristic symptoms are stiffness or slowness of movement, a shuffling walk, stooped posture, and difficulties in performing simple tasks. Parkinsonism can be caused by pharmaceutical drugs such as reserpine, chlorpromazine, and verapamil. It is also a common feature in dementia. However, the majority of parkinsonism patients suffer from Parkinson's disease which is parkinsonism of unknown cause (idiopathic). Researchers at the Mayo Clinic have just released the results of a 15-year study aimed at determining the incidence of the various types of parkinsonism in

a representative sample of residents in Olmsted County. During the period 1976 through 1990 the researchers documented 364 cases of parkinsonism. Most of these (42 per cent) were classified as Parkinson's disease, but an astounding 20 per cent were deemed to have been caused by poisoning by pharmaceutical drugs. The incidence of drug-induced parkinsonism was particularly high among women where it accounted for 28 per cent of all cases. Drug-induced parkinsonism is often reversible by prompt withdrawal of the offending drug. Parkinsonism associated with dementia was the most common form among old men (80-99 years of age) where it accounted for 41 per cent of all cases. The incidence of parkinsonism was found to rise dramatically with age from

26.5 cases per 100,000 person years in the 50-59 year age group to 304.8 per 100,000 in the age group 80-99 years. Overall the cumulative risk of developing parkinsonism by age 90 was found to be 7.5 per cent.

Bower, James H., et al. Incidence and distribution of parkinsonism in Olmsted County, Minnesota, 1976-1990. Neurology, Vol. 52, April 12, 1999, pp. 1214-20

Parkinsonism linked to pesticide exposure

MUMBAI, INDIA. Medical doctors in India report five cases involving the development of parkinsonism after exposure to organophosphate pesticides. This group of pesticides includes such common household products as malathion, diazanon, dursban, and chlorpyrifos. Four of the victims developed symptoms of parkinsonism after fumigating their homes. The fifth had tried to commit suicide by swallowing the pesticide. Treatment with l-dopa was ineffective, but most of the patients recovered fully once they were no longer

exposed to the pesticide. One woman had to move into another apartment as her symptoms kept recurring when she entered the fumigated apartment. The researchers conclude that exposure to organophosphate pesticides can cause parkinsonism especially in genetically susceptible individuals.

Bhatt, Mohit H., et al. Acute and reversible parkinsonism due to organophosphate pesticide intoxication. Neurology, Vol. 52, April 22, 1999, pp. 1467-71

Creatine helps muscular dystrophy patients

HAMILTON, CANADA. Creatine (creatine monohydrate) is a popular supplement among athletes. It occurs naturally in red meat and can produce remarkable gains in muscle strength in as little as two weeks. Now researchers at McMaster University report that creatine supplementation can help victims of neurodegenerative diseases such as muscular dystrophy to regain their strength. Their trial involved 80 patients with muscular dystrophy or other neurological diseases. Participants were given between five and 10 grams per day of creatine for 11 days. At the end of this period muscle strength (hand grip and knee extensor exercises) had increased by as much as 15 per

cent. Says Mark Tarnopolsky, one of the researchers, "In the longer term, it (creatine supplementation) could be enough to help someone who's having trouble eating to bring a spoon up to their mouth." He hopes that creatine supplementation may ultimately help people with Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, and Huntington's diseases. He points out that a number of studies have shown creatine to be entirely safe and advocates larger scale studies of its beneficial effects in the treatment of neurodegenerative diseases.

Walker, Matt. Strong stuff. New Scientist, March 20, 1999, p. 13

Pesticide pollution of drinking water

LUND, SWEDEN. A recent study carried out in Switzerland concludes that much of the rain falling in Europe contains such high levels of pesticides that it would be illegal to supply it as drinking water. Swiss scientists believe that the pesticides evaporate from newly sprayed fields and actually become part of the clouds. A pesticide level of 4000 nanograms/liter was

found in one rainwater sample. The accepted limit in drinking water within the European Union and Switzerland is 100 nanograms/liter. Dr. Stephan Muller of the Swiss Federal Institute for Environmental Science and Technology points out that the practice of using rainwater collected from roofs may be particularly hazardous.

Swedish researchers add to the concern by concluding that Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma is probably caused by commonly used pesticides. The incidence of Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma has grown by 73 per cent in the United States alone since 1973. The researchers found that Swedish sufferers of this disease were 2.7 times more likely to have been exposed to the weedkiller MCPA (Target) than healthy people. Exposure to glyphosate (Round-Up) was 2.3 times more likely among Non-Hodgkin's

lymphoma patients and exposure to fungicides 3.7 times more likely. The researchers warn that the introduction of Roundup-Ready soya beans (genetically modified to resist glyphosate) is expected to markedly increase environmental levels of glyphosate. They suggest that the pesticides suppress the body's immune system and thereby allow viruses such as Epstein-Barr to trigger cancer.

Pearce, Fred and Mackenzie, Debora. It's raining pesticides. New Scientist, April 3, 1999, p. 23

Ear piercing and allergies

HELSINKI, FINLAND. Allergies to nickel have shown a steep rise in recent years. Many sensitive individuals now find nickel-containing belt buckles, wristwatches, and jewellery impossible to wear. Finnish researchers believe that one of the worst offenders are nickel-containing earrings, studs and backplates intended for pierced tongues, noses, and cheeks. The European Union has guidelines for maximum nickel content (0.05 per cent by weight) and weekly emissions (0.5 microgram/cm²) of jewellery, but according to the Finns these guidelines are often exceeded. Moreover, the officially sanctioned test for nickel appears to be totally useless. The researchers tested 66 ear studs and earring backs imported

into Finland from Germany, Sweden, Britain, and the USA. When using the official test all the samples passed; however, when using a more sensitive atomic absorption spectrometry test 25 of the samples were found to exceed the EU limits. In another test involving jewellery for pierced tongues 11 out of 12 samples were found to have an excessive nickel content. Says Antti Ponka of the Helsinki Environmental Centre "Skin allergies triggered by nickel can lead to further health problems. If you are allergic to one thing, you are more prone to get another allergy." In other words, don't use nickel-containing jewellery.

Motluk, Alison. Cheap and nasty. New Scientist, January 30, 1999, p. 22

NEWSBRIEFS

Medical schools enter world of alternative medicine. A recent survey showed that 13 out of 16 Canadian medical schools now teach some form of alternative medicine to their undergraduates. Acupuncture was the most popular modality (taught in 10 schools), followed by homeopathic medicine (9 schools), and herbal medicine (8 schools). The three schools not yet including alternative medicine in their curriculum plan to do so in the near future. In nine schools alternative medicine is a required course. The information is usually provided in the form of lectures or seminars with little, if any, actual hands-on experience. A similar survey in the United States (125 medical schools) revealed that 30 per cent of schools incorporate alternative medicine as part of required courses

while 67 per cent offer elective stand-alone courses.

Drug firms fined \$725 million US. The United States Justice Department announces that the Swiss pharmaceutical giant, Hoffman-LaRoche has been fined \$500 million and the German firm, BASF AG, \$225 million. Both firms were found guilty of conspiring to raise and fix the prices of vitamins.

Vitamin E combats inflammation. Researchers at the University of Texas have discovered that vitamin E inhibits the enzyme which provokes the inflammatory process that leads to formation of cholesterol plaque in the arteries. Says one of the researchers "Vitamin

E is definitely an anti-inflammatory and this could have implications for other inflammatory diseases like rheumatoid arthritis."

Do antidepressants really work? Merck, a major manufacturer of pharmaceuticals, has shelved further development of their new antidepressant MK-869. The reason being that clinical trials showed it to be no more effective than a placebo. The questionable superiority of antidepressants over placebos was also highlighted in a study carried out by the Evidence Based Practice Center in San Antonio, Texas. The study involved selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) such as Prozac, Paxil, and Zoloft and concluded that 50 per cent of patients taking these drugs improved, but so did 32 per cent of the patients taking placebos. Irving Kirsch, a psychologist at the University of Connecticut, believes that a large part of the

effects of antidepressants is due to the placebo effect. After evaluating data from 30 trials involving Prozac, Zoloft, Paxil, Effexor, and Serzone he concludes that 78 per cent of the effects of these drugs can be ascribed to the placebo effect.

Canada moves to regulate natural supplements. The federal government has set up a new Office of Natural Health Products. The office will be responsible for labeling, licensing, and monitoring vitamins, herbs, and other supplements. Many see the move as long overdue as over 30 per cent of Canadians now use herbal products to prevent or treat their illnesses. The most commonly used herb is *Echinacea* which is now used by about 6 million Canadians (20 per cent of the population). Other popular herbs are garlic, ginseng, camomile, and *Ginkgo biloba*.

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