

Leukemia: Vitamin A is better, and safer, than chemo

Source: <http://sci.tech-archive.net/Archive/sci.med.diseases.cancer/2005-01/0253.html>

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Date: 01/13/05

Date: Thu, 13 Jan 2005 19:35:22 +0000 (UTC)

WHAT DOCTORS DON'T TELL YOU – E-NEWS BROADCAST No. 120 – 13 January 2005

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First thoughts of 2005: With my mind already overwhelmed by the human tragedy caused by the tsunami in Asia, I happened to pick up a recent edition of the Journal of the American Medical Association. It contained an article about children who were dying from cancer, and their heart-rending accounts of what was happening to them. No age was immune, and it contained the words of children as young as three, trying to understand death and leaving behind their mummies and daddies. For some inexplicable reason my thoughts turned to a poem by Philip Larkin, written after he had accidentally killed a hedgehog while mowing the lawn. In the face of meaningless destruction, the only thing we can do is to love each other, he wrote. It is perhaps the one intelligent response we can make. May it be ours in 2005.

WORK AT WDDTY: A new year, and maybe it could be a new start for you. We at What Doctors Don't Tell You are looking for a full-time editorial assistant to work at our offices in Wimbledon, south-west London. The ideal candidate will be a graduate, and will have some training and experience in journalism. Most of all, you will believe in the old-fashioned ideals of investigative journalism. The job entails research and writing, as well as some of the more mundane aspects of office life, such as the opening of the morning mail and responding to readers' correspondence. If this appeals, please e-mail us at: jobs@wddty.co.uk, including a mini-CV and current salary (if applicable). Alternatively, write to Lynne McTaggart at: WDDTY, 2 Salisbury Road, London SW19 4EZ.

OLIVE OIL AND PIZZA: They're both great for your health

If food is our medicine, scientists are beginning to understand why. They have started to uncover the secrets of the famed Mediterranean diet and its protective qualities against cancer, and especially breast cancer.

The key seems to be the olive oil dressing, which is rich in oleic acid, a monounsaturated fatty acid. In laboratory experiments scientists have discovered that oleic acid can dramatically reduce breast cancer cells, and in some tests eliminated 46 per cent of the cancer cells.

The scientists believe that oleic acid does not just protect against breast cancer, it can also prolong the lives of those with the cancer. Lead researcher Dr Javier Menendez of the Feinberg School of Medicine at Northwestern University believes that oleic acid can also protect against heart disease and is an anti-ageing agent.

The key is to use extra virgin olive oil as a cold dressing on salads or vegetables. It loses its protective qualities when it's used to cook food. Extra virgin olive oil isn't the only food that's good for our health. Step forward the humble pizza as a protector against heart attacks. People who regularly eat 'Italian pizza' halved their risk of an acute myocardial infarction, or heart attack, compared with those who ate pizza only occasionally. Even those who eat four portions or less a month still gained some protection.

The discovery was made by doctors at a Milan hospital who analysed the eating habits of 507 patients who had suffered their first heart attack, and compared them with 478 patients who had been admitted with other health problems.

Those who were 'frequent' eaters of pizza – defined as eating two or more 200 g portions of pizza a week – had the greatest protection, and compared with 'regular' consumers, who ate more than one a week, while the ones who had the least protection ate just one to three portions a month.

The doctors emphasise that the patients were eating pizzas from traditional pizzerias in Italian, where the quality of the ingredients is presumably higher. This may also explain the 'Clinton effect'. Former US president Bill Clinton is an avowed pizza eater, but he still recently underwent a quadruple coronary by-pass, so presumably the standard fast-food pizza isn't going to do the job.

Interestingly, the findings of the Milan study mirror earlier studies that found that tomatoes and tomato paste, which happen to be the most common ingredients in pizzas, had protective qualities against heart disease.

So what's the ideal meal? Why, fresh tomatoes swimming in cold extra virgin olive oil dressing, of course.

(Sources: Olive oil study – *Annals of Oncology*, 10 January 2005; doi:10.1093/annonc/mdi090; Pizza study – *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, 2004: 58; 1543–6).

LEUKEMIA: Vitamin A is better, and safer, than chemo

Oncologists have for the first time tested a therapy other than chemotherapy to treat leukemia, and it worked. But it wasn't another toxic, debilitating chemical that they turned to – it was vitamin A.

This simple therapy – which involved wrapping vitamin A inside bubbles of

fat – reversed a rare form of leukemia in up to a third of patients.

The key to the new therapy seems to be the delivery mechanism. When it's put in a lipid carrier, it retains its potency whereas earlier trials of vitamin A as an anti-carcinogen found that little of the vitamin was being absorbed by the body when it was taken orally.

Not surprisingly, it's been patented, and is being licensed as the 'drug' Lipo-Atra, even though it is essentially a form of vitamin A known as ATRA, which was originally found to help leukemia patients in studies in China.

It's been tested on a group of 34 patients with acute promyelocytic leukemia (APL), 10 of whom have been in remission for an average of five years, despite never having had chemotherapy.

Lead researcher Dr Elihu Estey at Texas University's Department of Leukemia said: "This is the first time we have seen patients with an acute leukemia potentially cured without use of chemotherapy. That's an important development in the field of leukemia, because traditional treatment with chemotherapy often produces side effects, even death, in patients with different kinds of leukemia than the one studied here." He said it.

(Source: Annual proceedings of the American Society of Clinical Oncology, 2004).

GUT PROBLEMS: Attend our free workshop, and see if we can help you

Dr Harald Gaier, What Doctors Don't Tell You's medical detective, returns to the big health topic of gut-related problems in the next of his free workshops for Enews readers.

The event is on Thursday, 20 January, and begins at 6.30pm at Harald's offices at 50 New Cavendish Street, London W1 with welcome drinks and snacks. The discussion begins at 7pm and lasts for an hour-and-a-half, which includes a time for questions and answers.

Places are limited, so please reserve your free place by contacting Karin on 0207 009 4650.

* **FOLLOW THE DETECTIVE:** The strange case of a young woman whose cold sores went away when she drank coffee is explored and explained by Harald Gaier in the latest issue of What Doctors Don't Tell You. To subscribe, just click here: <http://www.wddty.co.uk/shop/details.asp?product=330>

DRUG ALERT: Now the entire NSAID family gets a warning

America's drug 'watchdog', the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), had a nice Christmas present for the pharmaceuticals. On Christmas Eve it told all doctors in the USA to treat with extreme caution the entire family of NSAIDs (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs), such as aspirin, and which embraces the more recent version, the COX-2 agents.

While nobody was especially surprised about the COX-2 warning after their association with serious heart problems, few expected a blanket warning about the entire NSAID family, one of the most lucrative to the pharmaceutical industry.

The FDA has been very slow to act over the COX-2 drugs, which even the manufacturers were admitting represented a danger to health as far back as last September. Possibly sensitive to public concerns about its role as watchdog, the FDA moved with speed in issuing a warning about the entire

NSAID range, so catching everyone out, including the pharmaceutical companies.

Just days before the Christmas holidays the agency received the results from a clinical trial that suggested long-term use of naproxen, an NSAID, could cause heart problems.

This follows on from concerns about the COX-2 drugs Celebrex (celecoxib) and Bextra (valdecoxib), which have been linked to an increased risk of heart attack and stroke.

While the warning went out to doctors, the FDA is also concerned about consumers who regularly buy an NSAID, such as aspirin, for long-term use.

Use them 'in strict accordance with the label directions', the FDA states, and never take them for more than 10 days at a time.

(Source: FDA website).

CHRISTMAS QUIZ: The answers, and the winners

Finally, we turn to the results of our Christmas quiz. We weren't exactly inundated (well, it was Christmas, and you were set 10 tough questions, after all), but we've been able to find five winners.

First off, here are the questions once again, this time with the answers printed afterwards:

1. The NSAIDs are a family of painkillers that can cause gastric problems.

But what does the acronym 'NSAID' stand for?

Answer: Nonsteroidal, anti-inflammatory drug

2. Staying with acronyms, and painkillers, the NSAID gave way to the COX-2 drugs, which were thought to be safer. They weren't, of course. What does COX-2 stand for?

Answer: cyclo-oxygenase

3. Your friend has been told he's had a myocardial infarction. What would we say he's had?

Answer: Heart attack

4. Staying with myocardial infarctions (and why not), can you name three of the more common symptoms?

Answer: Vice-like grip around chest; pains down left side, arm, neck or upper abdomen. Indigestion. Ashen, clammy, short of breath, faint. Rapid heart beat. Faint pulse, low blood pressure, high temperature, irregular heart beat.

5. Where would you find your coccyx?

Answer: Vertebrae

6. Russian playwright Anton Chekhov had a degree in medicine. True or false?

Answer: True

7. It's a white, bitter crystal-like alkaloid. It is made from cinchona bark, and it's used in antimalaria drugs. What is it?

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Answer: Quinine

8. You'll have to visit the What Doctors Don't Tell You website for this one (<http://www.wddty.co.uk>). A woman who had been diagnosed with MS says our research 'saved her life'. But what did we discover was the real cause of her problem?

Answer: Dianette birth control pill

9. What is apnea?

Answer: loss of regular, automatic breath pattern

10. If someone suffers from meconium plug syndrome, how old would the patient be?

Answer: Newborn

The following submitted the correct answers and were picked from our electronic hat. Each will receive a signed copy of the new version of Lynne McTaggart's book, What Doctors Don't Tell You: Rosemary Jarvis, Peter Edwards, Miriam Blatt, Ken Seymour, and David Wooldridge. Well done to the winners, and thanks to everyone that participated. We will contact each of the winners by e-mail.

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