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Dear Friends,

I recently saw two news articles that made me think of the line "What's wrong with this picture?" Each one was interesting in itself, but seeing them in the same week started me thinking.

The first headline had to do with the presence of salmonella in processed meat. The USDA had tried to remove its inspection endorsement from one meat processor that had repeatedly produced salmonella-contaminated meat (a very common problem); the appeals court prevented the USDA from taking such action.

The end result was that salmonella could more easily get into the food supply, and consumers would be responsible for proper handling and cooking to make sure they were not eating contaminated food. The implication is that the government was less able to warn consumers of potential food hazards (although the USDA maintains that they are still doing their job, while they are very disappointed that they have lost this case).

The second article was a warning to seniors from the General Accounting Office (GAO) that they may be "risking their health" (and wasting money) by taking dietary supplements. The Associated Press article says that supplements can have "serious health consequences" for the elderly, and that they can "aggravate medical conditions." The GAO report also warned about possible

side effects from herbal supplements, or that the products might not work at all.

The juxtaposition of these two articles shows some misguided governmental priorities. The Centers for Disease Control estimates that "76 million people get sick, more than 300,000 are hospitalized, and 5,000 Americans die each year from foodborne illness," much of it from contaminated meat. In one study 20 percent of meat, chicken, turkey, and pork samples were contaminated with Salmonella (of which 84 percent were antibiotic resistant). Estimates based on a German study suggest that 30,000 Americans get hemorrhagic E. coli infections from meat contaminated with fecal material during slaughtering and processing, yet the courts are restricting the government from warning people about this specific risk, even though research shows that people are not knowledgeable about how to handle foods to prevent these risks. If dietary supplements led to one-tenth this level of risk, you can be sure the government would be trying to ban them altogether.

On the other hand, dietary supplements are helping millions of people to prevent and treat chronic degenerative diseases as well as everyday health problems. Side effects from nutritional products and herbs are few, and serious side effects are very rare, while deaths are virtually non-existent. If we spend time and resources warning people about unlikely risks, they become inured to warnings about real risks, and we waste the energy we need to focus on serious problems.

L-Arginine for The Heart

Recent research shows that the amino acid L-arginine is valuable as part of a supplement program for people with angina. In combination with soy isoflavones and vitamins C, E, and B-complex, supplements of L-arginine enhanced exercise tolerance in patients with coronary artery disease.

These subjects had a 20 percent improvement in their time on the treadmill compared to the control group. In addition, their blood vessel function improved, as measured by the relaxation of the brachial artery, and they had a better quality of life, based on a valid health questionnaire.

L-arginine is a non-essential amino acid, but as with a number of other nutrients and physiological substances, it is necessary in certain conditions, and is therefore considered “conditionally essential.” In physical trauma, surgery, burns, and wounds, L-arginine supplements promote healing and shorter hospital stays (of course, the less time you stay in the hospital, the lower your chance of developing an infection). L-arginine is also important for restoring immune function and promoting hormone release, including insulin and growth hormone.

Previous studies had shown that L-arginine helps with angina and congestive heart failure. In one, the effects of L-arginine and exercise were better for arterial function in heart failure patients than either intervention alone. In that study, the researchers used 8 grams of L-arginine, but the study ranges vary from 2 g to 20 g per day.

Other Arginine Benefits

L-arginine is a precursor to nitric oxide, a blood vessel relaxing factor. This helps to open up the flow of blood to the organs. Improving blood flow and lowering resistance not only improves the function of most organs, but it specifically lowers blood pressure. In research on animals and humans, L-arginine supplements significantly improve hypertension, with a 5 to 7 mm drop in both systolic and diastolic pressures, and supplements were better than increasing L-arginine from food sources.

These same studies also showed that supplements can reduce total cholesterol, increase the level of the good HDL-cholesterol, reduce triglyc-

erides, and improve regulation of blood sugar. Subjects on supplements also showed enhanced kidney function as measured by the ability of the kidneys to clear creatinine from the blood. L-arginine reduces the aggregation of platelets, the cells that initiate blood clots. Excessive aggregation of platelets can initiate clots inside blood vessels that lead to heart attacks and strokes.

L-arginine improves the ability of patients with hardening of the arteries in the legs to walk without pain (intermittent claudication), and to increase the total distance they can go. Because of its blood vessel effects, L-arginine can also help with male sexual dysfunction. Erectile dysfunction may result from reduced penile blood flow, and nitric oxide, which relaxes the penile blood vessels, is a prerequisite for normal erections.

The clinical studies are equivocal, however, as not all of them show benefits in sexual functioning from taking L-arginine supplements. Perhaps it is the dose used or the timing of the supplements that creates the disparity. In one study, measures of function improved, but the researchers were not able to demonstrate the physiological causes for the improvement. Nonetheless, some people refer to L-arginine as “natural Viagra,” and it has no apparent side effects.

If you are taking L-arginine for its circulatory benefits, you also need to attend to your diet and recognize that the supplement is synergistic with exercise. A regular exercise program is important even for patients with heart failure. Other supportive supplements include L-carnitine, vitamins C and E, magnesium, garlic, hawthorn berry, and ginkgo biloba. N-acetyl cysteine (NAC) significantly reduces the recurrence of heart attacks in patients on nitroglycerin, but may increase the headaches that nitro can cause.

Exercise As Medicine

Regular exercise is known to enhance brain function in the elderly. A new study shows that regular exercise also improves brain function in younger people. Seven healthy young people were put on a regular jogging program for three months. They then took complex computer tests to evaluate memory and other measures of cognitive function. Their scores were compared to the values at the start of the study. At the end, not only were their scores increased, but the reaction

times were measurably better and they completed the tasks faster than in the initial testing. However, if they stopped exercising, their scores began to fall, indicating that for long term preservation of brain function it is essential to continue physical activity.

A number of earlier studies have shown that exercise helps elderly people improve their brain function. Not only does their general cognitive ability improve, but they lower their risk of Alzheimer's disease and dementia of all kinds.

It is not clear why exercise is beneficial, but improved circulation and oxygen availability to the brain is one possible mechanism. Exercise also enhances the production of natural antioxidant molecules in the body called superoxide dismutase (SOD), and these are protective against functional decline from free-radical damage.

Other studies report that exercising reduces the risk of dying of heart disease and lowers mortality from all causes. Another benefit is that exercise can improve mood in elderly people who are frail, and they needn't worry about pain or discomfort, as even those with arthritis did not develop pain from the exercise.

Ask Dr. J

Q. Do you have any advice for treatment of hemorrhoids? I have pressure on my veins from liver disease and colon problems. (A.N. Internet)

A. Hemorrhoids are enlarged, varicose veins in the rectum and anus (internal and external). They are usually the result of excessive pressure on the vessels, and may be due to constipation or diarrhea and straining on the toilet, and they often develop during pregnancy. The valves that control the direction of blood flow become damaged, and then the veins bulge out and the walls get thin. This is the same mechanism that leads to varicose veins in the legs.

These veins are very close to the surface, so when they are bulging and thin they may bleed during a bowel movement. Just as leg veins may develop phlebitis, hemorrhoids can become inflamed, causing discomfort, burning, and itching.

Hemorrhoids are associated with low-fiber diets. Populations with a high fiber intake have a very low incidence of hemorrhoids.

If hemorrhoids are severe, they may require surgery or laser treatment to remove them or tie them off. However, even with advanced hemorrhoids, surgery may not be needed if symptoms can be controlled with diet and supplements, especially flavonoids (*Br J Surg* 2000 Jul; 87(7):868-72).

I recommend a high-fiber diet, with plenty of vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and legumes, and reduction of animal products (which have no fiber). I also suggest drinking 6 to 8 glasses of water a day, because the combination of fiber and water promotes easy bowel movements.

Bioflavonoids are anti-inflammatory and help strengthen vessel walls. I usually suggest mixed bioflavonoids (2000 mg per day), as well as vitamins C and E, proanthocyanidins (100 mg), and a mixture called Varitonin (from QCI Nutritionals at www.qcinutritionals.com or 888-922-4848) with horse chestnut (250 mg), butcher's broom (50 mg), gotu kola (60 mg) and the flavonoid hesperidin (125 mg), taken twice a day.

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In the Health News

- Alcohol has been recommended to reduce heart disease, but a new review suggests that it has little if any protective effect. Alcohol did not reduce the risk of having a fatal heart attack, and it increased the risk of dying from other causes (Wannamethee SG, Shaper AG, *Heart* 2002 87: 32-36). Long-term drinkers appear to have some benefit, but starting to drink for health does not improve heart risk, and overall mortality increases. Non-drinkers might abstain because they are already in poor health, and that could slant the data. If you are not a drinker, the present evidence does not indicate that you should start.
- Tai Chi, the Chinese art of movement, appears to give relief from osteoarthritis. Women in a treatment group had less pain, easier movement, and better balance than controls (*Reuters Health*, December 25, 2001). Earlier studies show that Tai Chi also lowers blood pressure.

Diet and Disease

- Breast cancer is related to diet and environmental factors. A new analysis of population data shows that mortality from breast cancer is increased by animal fat in the diet, and decreased by exposure to sunlight, which is essential for the formation of vitamin D in the skin (Grant WB, *Cancer* 2002 Jan 2;94(1):272-81). (Excessive sunlight, however, increases the risk of skin cancer.) Vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and fish all reduce breast cancer mortality. The author speculated that antioxidants, phytochemicals, phytoestrogens, and omega-3 oils are protective. In addition to animal fat, alcohol increases breast cancer risk. (Other studies show that high levels of meat and milk consumption can double and triple the risk of stomach and esophageal cancer, respectively. Chen H, et al., *Am J Clin Nutr* 2002 Jan;75(1):137-44)

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Mushroom Eggplant Skillet Sandwich

I use a covered non-stick electric skillet to make an easy healthy lunch. Wash several portabello mushrooms, and slice an eggplant and an onion to about the same thickness. Coat the mushrooms in a mixture of olive oil and balsamic vinegar (or lemon juice) with some ground pepper. Place them all on the electric skillet (or a large stovetop skillet—some cover two burners) set at 375 or medium high on the stove. Cover them for 5-10 minutes (depending on the size), flip them over and re-cover. Give them another few minutes and test to see if they are done. They should all be soft, and the onions browned and glassy. Layer them on whole-wheat toast with mustard or tofu mayonnaise a tomato slice and lettuce. You can use just eggplant or mushrooms if one is unavailable.

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