

## HEALTH BRIEFS

## TURNING OFF TUBE KEY TO BETTER COMMUNICATION BETWEEN COUPLES

What's the best way for two people in a relationship to communicate? "With the TV off," said Bob Beck, a clinical social worker and couples therapist at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. The television can be a distraction when two people are having a discussion. And it provides an easy escape when the conversation involves a problem that makes the participants uncomfortable. If a couple sincerely wants to improve communication, they should be willing to give each other undivided attention. "It might be easier to look away at the TV rather than face your partner, but you can better understand the other person's thoughts and feelings by maintaining eye contact, observing body language and facial expressions and concentrating completely on what is said," Beck said. "Turning the TV off when your partner sits down to talk lets that person know that what he or she has to say is important and interesting to you," Beck said.

## STUDY PROBING MERITS OF ESTROGEN REPLACEMENT AS CANCER AID

A large national study is evaluating whether estrogen replacement therapy (ERT) is safe in women who have survived cancer of the uterus—the most common gynecologic cancer. ERT is often prescribed for healthy women to compensate for estrogen loss during menopause because estrogen lowers the risk of osteoporosis and heart disease and alleviates hot flashes and other symptoms of menopause. "Because many of the tumors that arise from the uterus are estrogen-dependent, the concern has been that ERT could increase the risk of cancer recurring, although there is no data to support this view," said Dr. Alan Kaplan, principal investigator for the study site at Houston's Baylor College of Medicine. "Two small studies have suggested that ERT does not increase the risk of endometrial cancer recurring," said Kaplan, who is medical director of gynecologic oncology at the Methodist Hospital.

## IMPAIRED SIGHT, NEED FOR EYEGLASSES COMMON IN PEOPLE OVER 40

Nearly 90 percent of people over age 45 wear glasses all or most of the time. "Loss of the ability of the lens to focus up close is a normal biological change after people turn 40," said Dr. Richard Lewis, an ophthalmologist at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. To help focus on fine print and relieve eye stress, many people in their 40s resort to over-the-counter reading glasses. "These are acceptable for the average person who isn't unusually nearsighted or farsighted and who doesn't have a significant problem with astigmatism," Lewis said. "But they should not take the place of a complete, regular eye examination, which can detect glaucoma and other problems that tend to develop around middle age."

## EXERCISE, GOOD DIET CAN GET HEART ATTACK SUFFERERS BACK IN SHAPE

Simple lifestyle changes can help people who have had a heart attack get their cardiovascular system into shape. "Moderate exercise and proper nutrition strengthen the heart and improve overall fitness too," said Dr. Ryan Neal, director of cardiac rehabilitation at Baylor College of Medicine and the Methodist Hospital in Houston. A 12-week cardiac rehabilitation program might include aerobic exercise, muscle toning, nutritional instruction, counseling and medical monitoring with patients exercising three times a week on treadmills, stationary bikes and rowing machines. Each patient should be prescribed a unique rehabilitation program based on patient's level of fitness. Teaching patients how to manage their heart condition and prevent recurring heart attacks and coronary-artery disease is a critical part of rehab. "Our ultimate goal is to help patients develop a home-exercise program and lifestyle modification, including stress management," Neal said. "In many cases, they can return to or surpass their prior level of activity."

## RESEARCHERS SAY PINPOINT DRUG RESISTANT CANCER STRAIN NECESSARY

Researchers are trying to detect drug-resistant cancer cells in the laboratory before the drugs are used in patients. A better understanding of how the medications interact with cancer cells could help improve the drugs and reduce damaging side effects, said Dr. Pui-Kwong Chan, a pharmacologist at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. Chan has pinpointed a protein that is 20 times more abundant in tumor cells than in normal cells. Determining the exact role this protein plays in cancer cells could help scientists better understand how cancer cells work. "Because cancer cells have a much higher amount of protein, we theorize that one way to block the cancer cell's growth is to interfere with the protein's function," Chan said. While some cancer patients benefit from the drugs now available, other patients do not respond to the treatments.

HEALTH  
Ali urges more Parkinson's research

*Special to Sentinel-Voice*  
WASHINGTON — Former world heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali, known for his boisterous antics as a fighter, sat silent in a House committee room Thursday, his frozen gaze and trembling hands testifying to the ravages of Parkinson's disease.

The three-time heavyweight boxing champion bowed his head and closed his eyes as members of the House Commerce Committee's health subcommittee lauded him for his battle against the degenerative nerve disease.

"You bring all of us hope," Rep. Elizabeth Furse, D-Ore., told Ali.

The hearing also was to

consider research needs of relatively rare diseases such as Lupus, Friedreich's ataxia and the fatal lung disease Lymphangiomyomatosis, known as LAM.

But Ali's mute presence assured that within a cast of fatal diseases, Parkinson's held center stage.

In a joint written statement with his physician, Dr. Abraham Lieberman, Ali asked Congress to earmark \$100 million for National Institutes of Health research on the degenerative condition.

"Muhammad Ali is not bitter or angry that he has Parkinson's," said Lieberman, who also heads the National Parkinson Foundation.

"Ali feels there's a reason

God gave him this disease," Lieberman said.

"The message is that he will be the vehicle that obliterates Parkinson's disease. With a little extra push, we'll cure this in our lifetime."

Those suffering from Parkinson's disease fail to produce the neurotransmitter dopamine, which controls voluntary movement.

The onset is gradual, and Parkinson's can remain undiagnosed for years.

According to Lieberman, Pope John Paul II and Attorney General Janet Reno exemplify the "benign face" of Parkinson's.

The disease can in fact encompass muscular rigidity, memory loss, depression and



MUHAMMAD ALI

dementia.

Research indicates that up to 10 percent of Americans over age 60, even if they have no symptoms at this point in time, eventually will develop Parkinson's unless they first die of other causes.

## Assisted living provides independence care for elderly

By James L. Phillips, M.D.  
*Special to Sentinel-Voice*

With the number of senior citizens on the rise, assisted-living communities are providing a new way to maintain independence.

Years ago it was common to visit an elderly relative or neighbor in a nursing home that provided round-the-clock care. But today, many of the nation's elderly are living longer, healthier lives that allow them more independence.

Experts at Baylor College of Medicine's Huffington Center on Aging see assisted-living communities as an excellent option for elderly people who require some level of daily assistance. Facilities range from single or double rooms in a retirement complex to self-contained apartments.

Most centers provide three meals a day in a common dining room, housekeeping and linen service and assistance with bathing and dressing. Important support services such as medication

management, transportation to doctor's appointments and recreational and social activities are common.

The opportunity to keep active through interaction and activities with other seniors makes assisted living a desirable alternative. Residents have privacy in their living space and can bring a touch of their previous home with them by decorating and furnishing their rooms.

If you have a family member considering a move to assisted living, check the facilities available in your community. Tour all the facilities, and don't be afraid to ask questions about the staff, services, medical emergencies and cost.

Regulation of assisted-living communities and their personnel varies from state to state, so take time to become familiar with what is required and provided. By taking time to explore the options, your loved one can feel comfortable in a new environment and maintain a high level of personal independence.

## Inventory of household allergy triggers can ease suffering

*Special to Sentinel-Voice*  
HOUSTON — Allergy sufferers can help control allergy triggers by doing a "household inventory."

"Your home should be a safe place, but for sufferers of allergies and asthma, it can be a source for triggers that set off a reaction," said Dr. Robert Moore, a pediatric pulmonologist at Baylor College of Medicine and Texas Children's Hospital in Houston. "One of the best things you can do to control allergies and asthma is to do a thorough inventory of household triggers."

Knowing what is most likely to bring on an attack is crucial. This may involve keeping an asthma "diary" of possible causes or skin testing for allergies to narrow down the suspects.

"Finding triggers isn't always easy," Moore said. "Once you have a good idea, though, it's important to limit your exposure."

Common household allergy and asthma triggers include: Overstuffed furniture, shelves and other dusty surfaces; excessive humidity which spurs dust mite growth; rugs, another dust mite source, bare wood or tile floors are best; pet dander; tobacco smoke; poor household ventilation; infrequent changing of heater and air conditioner filters; clothes not properly stored. Keep clothes in closed closets and woolens in plastic bags; Bedding. Use washable synthetic blankets and pillows and cover mattress with aired-out plastic; Household cleaners. Common cleaners

such as ammonia, baking soda and nonchlorine bleach are less likely to trigger an attack than will more chemically based products; live plants, bathrooms, garbage pails, base-

ments and other potential sources of mold. Clean regularly to avoid mold growth.

"There is no such thing as a allergy- and asthma-free house," Moore said.

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