

HEALTH BRIEFS

COLOR CHANGE IN ESOPHAGUS A GOOD INDICATION OF CANCER

If your physician sees red, you may be at risk for the most rapidly increasing cancer among white men between ages 40 and 60. "Adenocarcinoma, one form of cancer of the esophagus, is usually preceded by a color change in the lining of the esophagus," said Dr. John McKechnie, a gastroenterologist at Houston's Baylor College of Medicine. "The lining's normal pink hue turns velvet red." The color change in the long tube that connects the mouth and the stomach is caused by chronic acid reflux. Repeated acid exposure can replace the lining of the esophagus with stomach lining, a condition known as Barrett's esophagus. If Barrett's esophagus has occurred, the condition of the lining cannot be reversed, but the patient has several options to prevent worsening the condition. Medication can suppress acid production. Avoid foods and drinks like coffee, chocolate, fatty and spicy foods, alcohol and orange and tomato juice.

PNEUMONIA VACCINE CAN HELP TO SAVE THOUSANDS OF LIVES

Thousands of people die each year because they are unaware of a vaccine that could save their lives. It is a vaccine for pneumococcal pneumonia, an illness affecting mostly adults aged 65 and older. "The vaccine is also important for people with lung disease, heart disease, any kind of immune disorder and those who have had their spleens removed," said Dr. Daniel Musher, an infectious disease expert at Baylor College of Medicine and the Veterans Affairs Medical Center, both in Houston. Musher urges physicians to recommend the vaccination to their patients and thinks everyone should be vaccinated every five-to-10 years.

NEW TREATMENT HELPS WOMEN WITH URINARY INCONTINENCE

Many older women suffering from stress urinary incontinence can get a handle on the problem by learning how to control their pelvic floor muscle. Stress urinary incontinence is a disorder that causes the loss of bladder control during coughing, laughing, sneezing, exercising and other activities. It is caused by damage to the pelvic floor muscles resulting from vaginal childbirth. Ninety percent of women who have stress urinary incontinence have had one or more vaginal childbirths. Between 25 and 40 percent of women 40 and older suffer from this problem. "Biofeedback can indicate whether the patient is exercising the right muscle," said Dr. Paul Fine, chief of urogynecology at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. Patches containing sensors are placed on the patient's pelvis, abdomen and thighs. The sensors record electrical activity in the muscles and display on a TV monitor the muscles being contracted and the strength of the contractions. The therapist then uses this biofeedback to teach the patient how to contract the pelvic floor muscle.

SURVEYS SAY AMERICA'S YOUTH BECOMING FATTER, LESS ACTIVE

Surveys show there has been an increase in the percentage of body fat and a decrease in physical activity in young people since the 1960s. "Twenty-one percent of children, ages 6 to 17, are obese," said Dr. Pat Vehrs, an adolescent health expert at Baylor's College of Medicine and the Texas Children's Hospital, both in Houston. Research has shown 70 percent of high school students are physically active for less than 20 minutes during physical education class. Only 10 percent of seniors even enrolled in daily P.E. classes. "Physical fitness helps improve a child's self-esteem, body image, academic performance, energy level and overall health," Vehrs said.

CHOLESTEROL-LOWERING DRUGS MAY HELP PREVENT FIRST HEART ATTACK

Cholesterol-lowering drugs may be beneficial to people who have never been diagnosed with heart disease, according to experts at the DeBakey Heart Center at Baylor's College of Medicine and The Methodist Hospital, both in Houston. "Our studies have shown that people who reduce their cholesterol levels lower their risk of heart attack by one-third," said Dr. Peter Jones, associate professor of medicine at Baylor and Methodist. More than half of American adults have high or borderline cholesterol levels. Too much cholesterol can lead to heart disease, the number-one killer of men and women.

HEALTH

Health gap between blacks, whites persists

By Laura Meckler

ATLANTA (AP) — Decades after the civil rights movement forced America to confront racial inequities, disturbing disparities remain on one of the most basic human levels: Blacks get sick, stay sick and die sooner than whites.

From day one, a black baby's life expectancy is six and a half years shorter than a white baby's. Blacks are more likely to be born too little and less likely to survive their first year.

At work and in schools, blacks have made impressive gains. Poverty has fallen. Still, disparities in health remain and in some cases are worsening — even among middle class blacks with health insurance and college degrees.

Asthma, hypertension, cancer. Name the disease and chances are blacks face a higher risk. They're nearly twice as

likely to die of a stroke than whites, 40 percent more likely to die of heart disease. Blacks' cancer death rates are 35 percent higher.

Other racial minorities also face disparities — Vietnamese women have five times as much cervical cancer, and American Indians have twice as much diabetes than whites. But among African-Americans, the gap cuts across nearly every major disease.

"We have been — and remain — two nations: one majority, one minority — separated by the quality of our health," said Secretary Donna Shalala, whose Department of Health and Human Services has launched a \$400 million program to attack the problem. "The time has come to stop accepting disparities with resignation."

Rubdowns excellent for patients recovering from injury

Special to Sentinel-Voice

HOUSTON — Massage isn't just for sore muscles anymore.

"Massage has become an important component of rehabilitation programs for patients recovering from a variety of injuries, including broken bones, joint replacements and back problems," said David Brennan, an exercise physiologist in the Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation at Baylor College of Medicine.

"Massage increases circulation, decreases muscle

spasm and allows muscle tissue to recover more quickly."

Typically used as part of a physical therapy regimen, massage is designed to complement, not replace, traditional rehabilitation. It can also be used to ease the pain of arthritis and treat migraine headaches.

Different types of massage therapy target specific problems. The nature of a patient's complaint can help determine which type of massage would be most beneficial.

"People with lower back pain, for example, shouldn't

have a deep-tissue massage," Brennan said. "This type of massage could actually do more harm than good. A Swedish massage, which involves light, soothing strokes, is more appropriate for these patients."

For patients experiencing muscle spasms, massage that zeros in on "trigger points" has been successful. This technique pinpoints sensitive areas in the muscles that lead to the spasms.

There are other types of massage approaches, but virtually all center around a common objective: manipulating and heating the

muscles to increase blood flow to the affected spots. This helps heal muscle and tissue.

Some states have few requirements to become a massage therapist. Brennan recommended checking credentials to ensure a therapist is licensed. The National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage can provide information about the certification of massage professionals.

"While massage might look easy to perform, the techniques are very detailed and require hours of training," Brennan said.

Americans falling short in fight against heart disease

By Katharine Webster

Fewer Americans are dying each year from heart disease, but the number of people suffering first heart attacks has held steady or even increased since 1987, a study found.

Researchers said the reason is that treatment is outstripping prevention.

Heart disease is the No. 1 cause of death in the United States, killing 481,458 people in 1994, according to the government. The study in last week's New England Journal of Medicine found deaths fell 28 percent among men and 31 percent among women from 1987 to 1994.

Over the same period, however, the number of black women hospitalized with first heart attacks rose 7 percent per year. The numbers stayed stable among black men and whites.

Dr. Valentin Fuster, president of the American Heart Association, said he is not discouraged because the trend is toward overall improvement.

More people are taking drugs to control their cholesterol or blood pressure, and more patients recognize the early warning signs of

heart attacks and get to hospitals, he said.

"Patients don't die in the street as they did before," Valentin said. "I think this is very positive altogether."

The study's lead author, University of North Carolina epidemiologist Wayne Rosamond, attributed the decrease in deaths mostly to better treatment for people once they have had a heart attack, not better prevention.

He said the unbudging number of first heart attacks and the high number of deaths that occur without warning outside the hospital suggest that efforts to recognize heart disease early and to get people to adopt healthier habits are falling short.

"What we're seeing is that improvement is slowing and there are still pockets of the population we need to get our prevention message to," Rosamond said.

The study looked at hospital admissions for heart attacks and deaths from heart disease among people age 35 to 75 living in Forsyth County, N.C.; Jackson, Miss.; eight Minneapolis suburbs; and Washington County, Md.

Gregory Heath, chief of heart health at the national

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, said Americans don't get enough exercise, depend too much on their cars and don't eat right.

"We have plenty of trees and woods in Atlanta, but no

sidewalks," he said. "I'm looking at our parking lot emptying for lunch. They're leaving and going up the road to fast food places where they're going to get an average of about 1,100 calories for one meal."

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