

HEALTH ACTION

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE PREVENTIVE MEDICINE INSTITUTE/STRANG CLINIC
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Dear Friend of PMI/Strang:

YOU CAN'T "GIVE YOUR COLD TO CONTACT" or any other medicine. The average upper respiratory infection lasts seven to ten days whether you treat it or not. There are no specific cures; any treatment merely controls symptoms. You can do no better than aspirin and neo-synephrine (½%) nose drops. So-called cold tablets, which contain antihistamines, cause a drying effect in the nasal passages. All antihistamines have side effects. Drowsiness or mental "fogginess" is the most common. In fact, the antihistamines are also the chief ingredient of the non-prescription sleeping tablets that one can buy in drugstores. Again, it is easier to pop a pill than to use nose drops, but there is no point in adding drowsiness to the other disagreeable effects of a cold.

While we are on the subject of colds let me say that most people do not know how to use nose drops properly. They should be put in one nostril while you are sitting erect with the head tilted back slightly. The nostril is then compressed with the finger and the head and body tilted all the way forward so that the chin is pressed to your chest. Sniff in so that the fluid goes up into the sinuses, and release the nostril. Tilting your head backwards does not work as well, unless you are lying across a bed when putting the drops in. Nose drops are better than sprays because they penetrate deeper and there is less chance of causing sinus infections. But if you do use sprays, follow the same procedure -- spray -- tip forward and sniff in.

IF DIABETES IS NOT CURABLE, why look for it if it's not bothering you? First, the early symptoms of diabetes are quite subtle -- a slight increase of thirst and frequency of urination. Often these are ignored. Second, the longer diabetes goes uncontrolled the greater the chance of complications, e.g.: infections, eye problems (including cataracts), nerve and kidney damage, and increase in blood lipids. Third, for those who are obese, the diabetic condition is often completely reversible by weight loss alone. Fourth, for the pregnant woman, hyperglycemia will lead to difficult childbirth, and an obese, often premature infant. Thus even if diabetes in most cases is not curable, its control leads to improved quality of life.

MOST OF THE PUBLICITY ABOUT MEDICAL PROGRESS in this decade has been directed towards cancer, starting with the National Cancer Act of 1971. All this has done has been to raise public expectations and has led to disappointment and frustration.

However, the real progress in medicine during this decade has been in cardiology, which has improved the quality of life for cardiac patients and in many cases has prolonged lives. I'm referring to the widespread use of cardiac pacemakers, the use of coronary bypass surgery, and the introduction of new drugs for heart disease.

For example, it has been shown recently that even patients with chronic congestive heart failure no longer responsive to digitalis preparations or diuretics can be improved with other treatment, particularly with drugs that cause a vasodilator effect. Also, it has been found that ordinary aspirin, given regularly to men with early warning signs of stroke, will decrease the incidence of apoplexy. This is the kind of research that translates into medical progress. Solid research is being carried out in cancer too, but it doesn't help to have it done under the spotlight of publicity.

A NEW SURVEY by the National Center for Health Statistics has shown that almost eight million Americans between the ages of 20 and 74 are severely obese (more than 30% overweight for men and more than 50% overweight for women). Earlier surveys have shown that the weight of the average American has been creeping up decade by decade. We pay a high price for overeating, but apparently not too many people mind, since we overindulge now and pay later. While it is generally known that heart disease, hypertension, strokes, and diabetes are more common in obese individuals, it is not widely appreciated that there is also an increased incidence of cancer among the obese. This is not entirely new: in the nineteenth century, Paul Ehrlich (the discoverer of the "magic bullet" who also did cancer research) speculated on the role of overnutrition in cancer. Experiments with animals have documented this association and additional scientific information is now accumulating. Taking off pounds, therefore, can be viewed as a real cancer prevention measure.

IT IS NOT GENERALLY KNOWN that virtually all cattle in the United States are treated with the female hormone diethylstilbesterol (DES) to fatten them up for market. This is the same DES that women took during pregnancy 20 or 30 years ago and which is often causing cancer of the vagina in their daughters (DES daughters). The same DES has been implicated in the dramatic rise in the U.S. incidence of cancer of the endometrium (lining of the uterus). The Canadian government forbids the import of such beef. For the Canadian market, cattle have to be raised without DES. Do the Canadians know something we don't? No, we know the same things, but in Canada they do not have to contend with the cattle lobby. It would be more costly to raise cattle without estrogens -- additional feed would be required. But government analysts estimate that after a few years costs would return to their baseline values.

Poultry too are fed with drugs, tetracycline and penicillin among others. These, however, do not have the toxic potential of estrogen hormone except to those who are allergic to the drugs. Somewhere along the line there should be a consumers' lobby for health. However, one cannot escape the feeling that this is a legitimate function of our government. After all, one of the reasons people form governments is for protection, but there may be more danger from within than from without. Or, as Pogo once said, "We have met the enemy and it is us."

YOUR ENTIRE SKELETON is made of calcium, so it must be good to take extra calcium if you want to strengthen your bones -- right? Wrong! There has been a campaign to sell calcium preparations, particularly to older people who have numerous skeletal complaints and those who think they have osteoporosis. Osteoporosis is a disease too loosely diagnosed and it does not respond to calcium anyway. The intestinal tract regulates the amount of calcium you absorb, so if you take too much it will wind up in your stool. Moreover, if you take a combination of calcium and vitamin D you will overcome this intestinal barrier to absorption and you may wind up with calcium stones. Growing children need calcium and pregnant women may need calcium. The rest of us need not take calcium in any form of medication.

Another mineral commonly self-prescribed is iron. If you take too much iron it will upset your stomach. The gastrointestinal tract regulates absorption of iron and prevents the excess from leaving the GI tract, but if you are given iron by an injection it can cause a form of cirrhosis. If your doctor is giving you injections of iron, get a good explanation or a second opinion.

I AM WRITING THIS PART OF THE NEWSLETTER from Thailand, where I am serving as a World Health Organization consultant in cancer control. You may ask why should a developing country with major problems with communicable diseases be concerned with cancer.

In the first place, cancer is a public health problem, not in the sense that it is a communicable disease, but by virtue of the fact that it uses up a disproportionate amount of public health money in relation to the number of cases. Second, cancer is the most dreaded disease, and the government is responding to the concerns of the people. Third, one of the most common forms of cancer -- cancer of the cervix -- lends itself to early diagnosis and cure by the Pap test and simple treatment.

But underlying the chances for success of these programs is public education. Education means translating knowledge into personal behavior and practices. For example, few young Thai women smoke, not because of any dire warning on the cigarette package (there are no such messages), but because they have been taught and believe smoking causes bad breath and dulls the brightness of their teeth, thus making them less attractive. I think I will learn more from the Thais than they will from me.

WHEN I WAS AN INTERN, a man was brought into the emergency room one evening in a coma. No, he had not had a stroke, or a head injury, and he was not a diabetic. He had glaucoma, and his eyes had been causing severe pain. He had called his doctor, who told him to take aspirin, as many as he needed, to relieve the pain. The man had taken over 700 tablets! Remarkably, he recovered. He needn't have taken that many to go into coma, particularly since he was elderly and his kidneys were not functioning properly.

Aspirin can cause acidosis in those who take it in large quantities -- more than 20 or 30 a day. Some people with painful arthritis are not aware of the amount of aspirin they are taking, since they may not know the ingredients of the medication purchased over the counter for the relief of arthritis, sinus problems or headaches.

Many products sold for such purposes contain aspirin as their primary ingredient. It is important to read labels.

In addition, many people are sensitive to aspirin; it can cause stomach pain or even gastric hemorrhage and ulceration. You should not take aspirin if it causes you gastric distress. Buffered aspirin will not help, and aspirin substitutes should be used instead. But aspirin, one of man's most ancient drugs (Hippocrates prepared salicylic acid scraped in crystal form from the bark of trees, and used it much as it is used today), has anti-inflammatory and anti-coagulation properties that aspirin substitutes do not have.

In general, aspirin is becoming a more, not a less important drug, and should be used with the respect due an ancient benefactor of mankind.

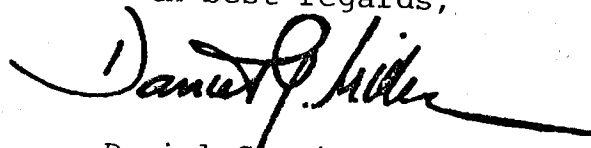
DID YOU EVER HEAR THE EXPRESSION, "That noise is driving me crazy"? Well, noise can drive you crazy. It can also make you irritable and aggressive, and can cause hypertension, headaches and ulcers. All this is apart from the hearing damage that occurs from chronic noise exposure.

Did you know that teenagers are especially susceptible to noise-induced hearing loss? (Attention, parents of rock fans and of young musicians who use instruments with electronic amplifiers). Did you know that many truck drivers, after many years on the road, lose the hearing in their left ear? Did you know that hearing loss we associate with old age is virtually nonexistent among many rural tribes?

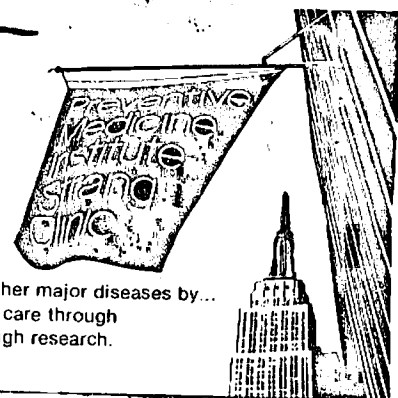
Here's a little test you can take if you think you are in a hazardous noise area. Cover one ear for two minutes while exposed to the noise. Then go to a quiet room and turn on some music or start to speak. If the sound is crystal clear in the ear that was protected and a little dull or fuzzy in the other, you were in a situation where prolonged exposure could lead to hearing loss. You may wish to purchase ear plugs; you can buy them in any drugstore. Cotton alone does not afford very much protection.

Enclosed with this issue of the Newsletter is a little PMI/Strang folder that you may wish to keep. It contains telephone numbers for several important emergency services, as well as the numbers to call for a variety of health and consumer information services and for environmental complaints. I hope that those of you who live or work in New York City find the folder useful.

With best regards,



Daniel G. Miller, M.D.
President and Medical Director



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• providing thorough, modern, one-stop health examinations • promoting preventive health care through education/information programs • developing better diagnostic/preventive techniques through research.