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Study predicts heart risks

CHICAGO (AP) — Middle-age Americans have a 90 percent chance of eventually developing high blood pressure, a new study estimates. But experts say many can still beat the odds with diet and exercise.

The study, published in Wednesday's Journal of the American Medical Association, prompted warnings from the nation's top health authorities, including Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson and Dr. Claude Lenfant, director of the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute.

"Ninety percent is a staggering statistic and cause for concern," Thompson said. "This finding should energize Americans to take steps to protect themselves against high blood pressure."

Lenfant, whose agency helped fund the study, said Americans "cannot adopt a wait-and-see approach. If they do, chances are they will find themselves with high blood pressure, and that puts them at increased risk for heart disease and stroke."

High blood pressure is estimated to affect 50 million Americans.

The study, among the first to calculate the lifetime risk of developing the condition, involved mostly whites. Lifetime risks may be even higher for blacks, who are disproportionately affected by high blood pressure.

The findings are based on an analysis of 1,298 men and women taking part in the continuing Framingham Heart Study, which began in 1948 and has examined participants every two years.

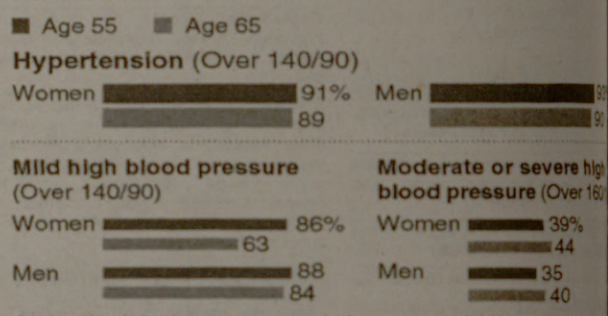
The JAMA study involved participants who had not developed high blood pressure by 1975.

The authors estimated the lifetime risk of developing high blood pressure among 55-year-olds and 65-year-olds over a follow-up period of 20 to 25 years.

Nearly 85 percent of the participants eventually developed at least mildly high blood pressure — readings of 140 over 90 or more.

Heart risk higher at middle age

Middle-age Americans face a 90 percent lifetime risk of developing hypertension, defined as abnormally high blood pressure, according to a study. The risk generally increases between the ages of 40 and 65.



Optimal adult blood pressure is less than 120/80.

Ways to help your heart

- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Follow a healthy eating plan, which includes foods lower in salt and sodium.
- If you drink alcoholic beverages, do so in moderation.
- If you have high blood pressure and are prescribed medication, it as directed.
- Be physically active.

NOTE: Findings are based on an analysis of 1,298 men and women taking part in the ongoing Framingham Heart Study, which began in 1948 and has examined participants every two years. The JAMA study involved participants who had not developed high blood pressure by 1975.

SOURCES: Journal of the American Medical Association; National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute

NEWS IN BRIEF

Drug triggers negative reaction in HIV patients

SEATTLE (AP) — Genetic testing can reveal whether a widely used AIDS drug is likely to trigger a life-threatening reaction that occurs in about 5 percent of all people who take it.

The drug, known generically as abacavir, was approved in 1998 and is a mainstay of AIDS treatment, typically used in combination with other medicines to hold HIV in check.

Doctors have long suspected that some genetic factor was involved in the adverse reaction, which often occurs after patients

have taken it for about two weeks. The best finding should help doctors avoid the problem by screening patients in advance for the telltale gene.

The discovery that particular genes seem to be involved is the latest advance in an emerging field of medical study called pharmacogenetics.

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Space mission faces last minute problem

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — With just one day left before launch, NASA scrambled Wednesday to investigate a potential problem with the landing gear on space shuttle Columbia, poised to take off for a service call to the Hubble Space Telescope.

The space agency also braced for unusually cold weather that could force a flight delay. Temperatures were expected to drop to 38 degrees at the time of Columbia's planned 6:48 a.m. launch on Thursday.

The landing gear issue arose during a high-level meeting of mission managers on Tuesday afternoon. By Wednesday morning, three engineering teams were working on the problem in hopes of getting "comfortable" with it in time for Thursday's launch, said NASA spokesperson George Diller.

Eight wheel bearings on Columbia's main landing gear evidently were treated with 300-degree heat before installation, rather than the 500 degrees intended to keep them from breaking during touchdown, Diller said. Engineers were trying to determine if the temperature difference may have weakened the bearings.

"They're starting to get comfortable with it, but there's still a lot more data analysis to do," Diller said.

Shuttle program manager Ron Dittmore said a wheel bearing failure during landing could be disastrous.

"If you lose the bearing, its ability to take the load in the bearing, then your wheel isn't going to turn very well and it could lock up under heat or fric-

tion and then you've got a problem going down there at landing at 200 mph," Dittmore said.

"The wheel doesn't start to skid. That would be a real bad day."

Replacing the bearings, necessary, would require a week of work back in the hangar.

Forecasters said there was a 40 percent chance Thursday's cold could delay launch. Warmer weather was expected Friday.

Extreme cold could cause some shuttle systems, including the extensive fuel plumbing, to increase the building on the external fuel tank concern is that chunks could fall off during liftoff, strike Columbia.

NASA has been wary of weather ever since the Challenger disaster. The temperature was 36 degrees on January morning when Challenger lifted off, but it had been well below freezing the night before. The cold caused seals to fail in the solid-fuel booster rockets, allowed blazing hot gas to

Redesigned booster rockets now have heaters to prevent rubbery O-rings from becoming brittle in cold weather.

Once they arrive at the launch pad, Columbia's astronauts will install an advanced carbon dioxide refrigerator system to replace a disabled infrared heater. A new steering mechanism, power-control unit, and solar wings for generating more electricity. The flight was delayed 11 days.



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