

Chilling out



Doug Meier, a chemistry graduate student, adds liquid nitrogen to an ultra-high vacuum chamber. The low-temperature liquid helps improve the vacuum, which is used to test metal catalysts.

Research shows link between mental stress and blood-vessel blockage

DALLAS (AP) — The way people handle stress may be a factor in whether they develop injured blood vessels or blocked arteries, conditions that lead to heart attacks and strokes.

Researchers reported the possible link between mental stress and changes to the cardiovascular system in a study published Tuesday in *Circulation*, the journal of the American Heart Association.

The study focused not so much on stress as it did on an individual's reaction to stress. The results suggested that people who handle stress well may be less likely to develop certain cardiovascular problems.

Researchers gave 2,682 Finnish men between 42 and 60 years old cognitive and motor-skill tests to perform, then charted changes in their blood pressure.

The tests, given between March 1984 and December 1989, involved having the men press a button when they saw a target on a computer screen or memorize a pattern on the screen and reproduce it.

Researchers then measured changes in blood pressure and heart rate produced by the tasks.

"We don't know how much stress the men were under. We know they showed different responses," said Dr. Thomas Kamarck, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Pittsburgh and the study's lead author.

"Some showed large blood pressure changes and some showed small blood pressure changes to the same standardized tests," he said.

In follow-up studies between 1991 and 1993, researchers checked the men for physical conditions that can cause cardiovascular problems, such as atherosclerosis (blocked arteries).

The top 20 percent of the subjects who reacted most strongly to the stress tests were found to have thicker carotid artery walls than the 20 percent of subjects who had the smallest reaction.

Carotid arteries are the two principle neck arteries that deliver

blood from the heart to the head and increases in thickness of artery walls are believed to increase the risk for heart disease.

A mean artery wall thickness of .89 mm was found among the most strongly to the study compared to .85 mm among the 20 percent.

While the difference in thickness between the two groups may seem small, it represents a major increase in heart disease risk for the people who

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DR. THOMAS KAMARCK
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR
UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

artery walls, according to previous studies. Those that an increase in arterial thickness can increase the risk of heart attack by 11 percent, researchers said.

But a cardiovascular researcher was not involved with the study, he said. "I was not involved with the study, but I was interested in the link between stress and heart problems."

Dr. Redford Williams, director of the Behavioral Medicine Center at Duke University, said the study's findings were "consistent with a link between stress and actions and atherosclerosis."

"I very carefully checked the 'consistent with' because it still proved it," Williams said. "I've suggested researchers retest the group in a few years to see if findings remain the same."

Kamarck agreed that more research is needed before the development of cardiovascular problems.

Committee renews review of tax system
Representatives continue research into property-law reform

AUSTIN (AP) — It was a case of deja vu for participants in Monday's meeting of the House Committee on Revenue and Public Education Funding.

The same committee that earlier this year crawled through the state's entire tax system is renewing its review of how Texans pay for state government.

But leaders of the revamped effort say they are conducting a different study that will conclude in a different result.

"Some of you think we've been here before. You're wrong," said House Speaker Pete Laney, D-Hale Center. Laney appointed the 11-member

committee earlier this year and asked its members to continue their tax research after the 1997 legislative session ended in June.

"We want to know what is right and what is wrong about our economy," Laney said. "We want to know if there are ways to make it better."

After a long review of the tax structure during this year's legislative session — a review prompted by Republican Gov. George W. Bush — the committee recommended sweeping tax changes to lower property taxes by about \$5 billion by making businesses pay more.

The House and Senate, however, could not agree on a final tax-cut-

ting plan and settled on a much smaller, \$1 billion property tax cut, paid for with existing state funds and no new taxes.

The effort now, members of the committee said, is not to cut property taxes but to find out more about each tax the state levies.

Heading the committee again is Rep. Paul Sadler, D-Henderson. He asked committee members to draft detailed reports about each state tax, making clear who pays each one, who's exempt, and the pros and cons of each levy.

"We don't want our tax system to be obstructive to growth," Sadler said. "It is worthwhile and respon-

sible of us and prudent of us to review our tax system."

Sadler said the last tax review was focused on cutting property taxes and had to be completed within the 140-day legislative session. He said the committee now has more time — a final report isn't due to the full Legislature until January 1999 — and more knowledge about the subject.

"I do not want this to be a rehash," he said. "This is not a committee that is going to decide in advance where we are going and hold hearings to get there. Our role is to memorialize what we know and develop a road map for the future."

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