

Study shows low-dose therapy protects bones after menopause

CAGO (AP) — Half the usual dose of estrogen given to women after menopause is sufficient to protect their bones from osteoporosis and brought on fewer unpleasant side effects, researchers found.

The low dose also had favorable effects on cholesterol and other fats circulating in the blood, suggesting its potential for protecting postmenopausal women from heart disease. The low-dose therapy might also be significant, researchers said.

Protection from bone thinning and osteoporosis are major benefits of higher-dose estrogen replacement therapy over the long term. But many women are leery of hormone therapy because studies suggest it increases breast-cancer risk. Many women who begin hormone

therapy for relief of menopausal hot flashes and other symptoms quit in a year or two because of side effects, said the lead researcher, Dr. Harry K. Genant of the University of California, San Francisco.

"It may be possible to prevent osteoporosis with lower, safer doses of estrogen."

DR. MICHAEL MARICIC
ARIZONA HEALTH SCIENCES CENTER

Low-dose estrogen in the study caused

less breast tenderness, headaches and nausea than the standard higher-dose treatment does, and it could be expected to pose less breast-cancer risk, Genant said.

The study of 406 women is published in the December issue of the American Medical Association's Archives of Internal Medicine, released Sunday.

A related study in the journal found that alendronate, a non-hormonal drug used to fight osteoporosis, was highly effective at reducing the risk of spinal fractures even in very old and severely osteoporotic patients.

That study involved 2,027 women aged 55 to 81 and was led by Dr. Kristine E. Ensrud of the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Minneapolis. The study was supported by Merck Research Laboratories of Rahway, N.J., a division of Merck and Co., which makes alendronate under the brand name Fosamax.

A researcher not involved in either study, Dr. Michael Maricic of Arizona Health Sciences Center in Tucson, said both resulted in important findings.

"It may be possible to prevent osteoporosis with lower, safer doses of estrogen, and if prevention is no longer possible, it is never too late to treat," Maricic said.

Osteoporosis afflicts an estimated 10 million Americans, mostly elderly women, and the fractures it causes cost an estimated \$13.8 billion in 1995.

In the two-year study led by Genant, postmenopausal women taking only 0.3 milligram of estrogen showed no loss of bone mass and some even had a slight in-

crease. The usual dose of estrogen for preventing osteoporosis is 0.625 milligram.

The low-dose subjects took the hormone with 1,000 milligrams of supplemental calcium daily.

Standard higher dose estrogen therapy is also supplemented with calcium and combined with the female hormone progesterin to offset estrogen's tendency to promote cancer of the uterine lining.

The most commonly used estrogen drugs, of which the best-known brand is Premarin, are derived from animal and synthetic sources and are approved for use in preventing and treating osteoporosis. The estrogen used in the low-dose study is derived from plants and not approved for treating osteoporosis. Its best-known brand is Estratab.

AMA meeting focuses on defunct endorsement

AS (AP) — Doctors at an annual meeting of the American Medical Association Sunday denounced an abortive endorsement deal with Sunbeam Corp. and debated whether to launch an outside investigation.

At the AMA's reputation, which has been called into question because of the deal to endorse Sunbeam's health care products.

The organization has tried to withdraw from the deal, prompting Sunbeam to sue the AMA for \$20 million. The AMA House of Delegates, made up of 475 member-physicians, is conducting their annual meeting in Dallas.

Thomas Reardon, the chairman of the AMA board of trustees who has been under fire since word of the deal became public, said the board was unaware of the deal and contended it was orchestrated at a lower level.

Reardon also denied allegations that the AMA was seeking deals with other companies to make up financial shortfalls resulting from declining membership.

He told a committee at the annual meeting of the AMA House of Delegates that the board has taken steps to repair whatever damage the AMA's reputation has suffered because of the Sunbeam controversy.

Among them, he said, are a moratorium on any new business deals until the AMA board sets clear policies to govern them, a prohibition against the use of the AMA's name or logo in product or service endorsements, and requests for the resignations of three senior AMA executives.

Reardon identified those executives as Kenneth Monroe, chief operating officer; Larry Jellen, vice president of marketing; and James Rappel, vice president of business development.

Dr. P. John Seward resigned as executive vice president Friday, accepting partial responsibility for the arrangement. It was unclear whether he was asked to step down, although Seward called the agreement with Sunbeam "a serious mistake."

The committee will submit several resolutions to the board for a vote Tuesday. Among the resolutions is a call for Reardon's resignation.

Unit faces challenge of caring for older prisoners

FORT WORTH (AP) — Many require restricted diets and have special medical needs, including kidney dialysis, which cost taxpayers \$122 per treatment. The cost of housing an inmate in the geriatric ward is about \$16,200 a year, almost the same as a typical prison unit. But medical expenses, an average of about \$8,000 per year per inmate, are four times higher than for typical inmates, according to TDCJ statistics.

The 59 inmates assigned to the Estelle Unit about 10 miles north of Huntsville are part of a growing population of inmates over 60.

The number of inmates 60 and older has been steadily increasing for five years, keeping pace with the increase of the general prison population,

the Fort Worth Star-Telegram reported Sunday.

The 60-and-over group reached 1,662 in 1996, up from 639 in 1992. Most older inmates remain in prison because of recent policies mandating longer sentences and more stringent parole requirements; some are there because they committed crimes as senior citizens.

Although they represent just 1 percent of all state prisoners, the older generation of inmates is expected to keep growing as the prison system expands, officials say.

Tony Fabelo, executive director of the Texas Criminal Justice Policy Council, said his staff has not determined what effect a larger elderly inmate population will have on the state's

144,000-bed prison system.

"That is an issue we are going to have to study very carefully," said Fabelo, whose agency analyzes trends and forecasts the prison system's needs. "It stands to reason that an older population will put a strain on the system because their medical needs cost more and because of concerns for their safety."

The men in Estelle's geriatric ward are considered medically unfit to work and unlikely to become violent, so they are free to roam around their dormitory and the ward's two day rooms as they wish or may choose to lie in their bunks all day. The day rooms have color television and are separated by a cafeteria that also serves as a common area.

Women share miracle, sadness of lifesaving heart transplant

DALLAS (AP) — Almost three years after undergoing a lifesaving heart transplant, the recipient met the mother of the donor.

The heart of Angelina Davis' young son, Ernesto, beats strongly within Shari's chest. Without that extraordinary gift, Shari — who asked that her last name not be used — never would have gotten the chance to watch her own boys grow up.

The two mothers met Saturday at Medical City Dallas Hospital. Both said they were nervous, a little uncertain and desperate to see each other.

The meeting was part of the "Holidays With Hearts of Angels" celebration at Medical City Dallas, where 100 heart transplants have been performed.

Davis brought along a photograph of her son, Ernesto Garza, just 13 when he died in a February 1995 auto accident in his hometown of Victoria.

"He has a sparkle in his eyes," Shari said. "That tells you a lot."

Shari and Eric huddled with Davis, daughter Beatrice Garza her grandson, exchanging bits of history and sharing the details that brought them together.

Davis spoke proudly of her son, a boy fiercely protective of his family, with a fiery temper and a giving heart.

When his sister Beatrice got her driver's license at 16, Ernesto wondered

about the box for organ donation. Beatrice explained why she had marked "yes," and Ernesto told his mother, "I want to do that."

The discussion came two weeks before he died, Davis said.

While Ernesto's death was quick and unexpected, Shari's illness lingered for months and grew progressively worse.

She was several months' pregnant with her fourth son, Kendal, feeling tired and weak, when doctors discovered she suffered from a critical heart problem.

Her left ventricle was not pumping nearly enough blood, and the heart itself was enlarged, she said.

"They immediately put me on bed rest and suggesting terminating the pregnancy if I was to survive," Shari said. "We refused that recommendation, and I went to bed and stayed there for the next four months."

Shari carried Kendal to term, though she was so weak, "I could barely lift my arms," she said.

After the birth, Shari and Eric were sure she would recover with medicine and therapy. But she grew steadily weaker. By Christmas 1994, she was so exhausted, Shari was convinced it would be her last holiday with her family.


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UNITED STATES AMERICAN

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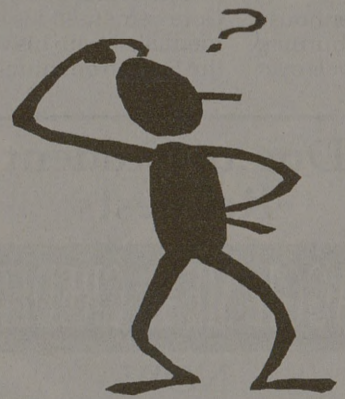
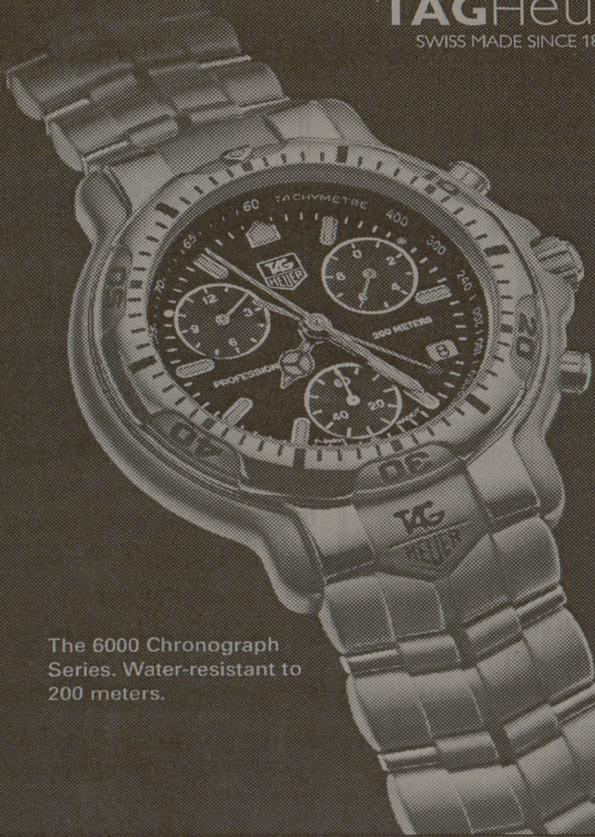
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