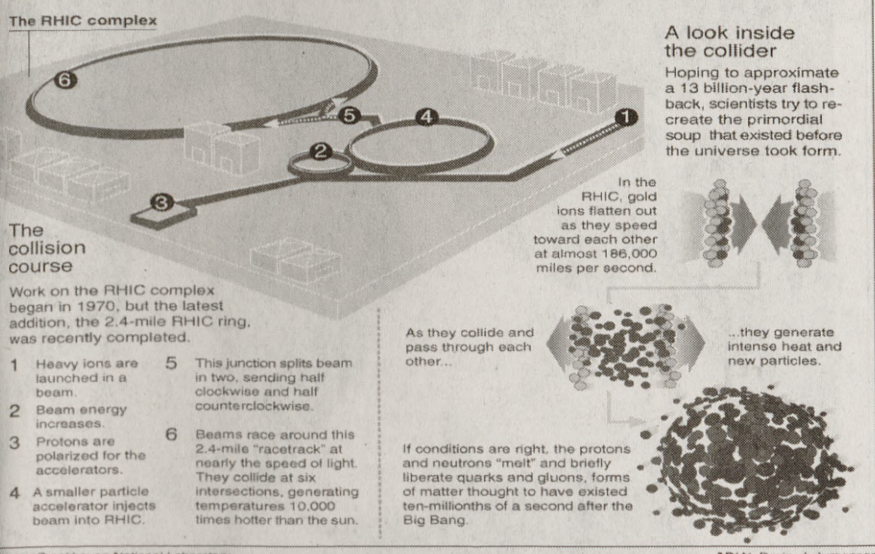


Back to the Big Bang

The new Relativistic Heavy Ion Collider (RHIC), a massive atom smasher, should help researchers simulate what the newborn universe may have looked like just after the Big Bang.



Beyond birth control

Women should consider therapy risks and benefits

BY NONI SRIDHARA
The Battalion

A freshman, who came to Texas A&M in the fall, was frequently consumed by intense lower abdominal pains and thought she had appendicitis. Doctors' tests showed that she had endometriosis, a disease common to many women in America, which could be treated with hormone therapy through birth control pills. The pills helped to stabilize her menstrual cycle, which was causing her abdominal pains.

The replacement of lost hormones — estrogen and progesterone — for women in their 40s and 50s is a common medical practice. People often mistake hormone replacement as a therapy only for women going through menopause. However, doctors often prescribe its use to younger women and say that both generations need to know the risks and benefits.

Dr. John Green, a visiting cardiovascular physiologist in the Department of Health and Kinesiology, helped dispel myths and offer insight into the role of reproductive hormones and hormone replacement therapy (HRT) in female physiology in the final lecture of the Healthy Living Lecture series Wednesday at the Student Recreation Center.

In his lecture, Green covered the risks and benefits of hormone replacement for women of all ages.

The first type of HRT Green discussed was the birth control pill, which regulates leutinizing hormone, the hormone that causes ovulation. Without the hormone, no ovulation will occur.

The benefits of birth control as a means of hormone replacement are decreased risk of ovarian cancer, endometrial cancer and ovarian cysts, the decreased risk of pelvic inflammatory disease and lighter or more regular periods.

"This is considered by many to be the most socially significant medical advance in history," Green said.

Dr. Ann Reed, associate director of clinical services at A.P. Beutel Health Center agreed with Green on the positive aspects of HRT.

"Although the risks are slightly increased for certain cancers such as cancers that affect the lin-

ing of the uterus, overall the benefits outweigh the risks," Reed said.

Green said there were many concerns with the birth control pill in the '60s because of increased risk of blood clotting, heart attack and stroke. But he said this risk is minimal in today's pill and where it does exist, it is linked to smoking.

Other risks from the pill include a slight increase in risk of breast and cervical cancer and a small increase in the risk of coronary artery disease in women over the age of 40.

Regarding menopause, Green said there is a common misconception among older women that menopause happens overnight. It is actually a prolonged process.

The World Health Organization defines menopause as the permanent cessation of menstruation resulting from loss of ovarian function. The average age that menopause strikes most women is 51.4 years, according to Green.

Green said cardiovascular risks in menopause include increased LDL cholesterol, decreased HDL cholesterol, increase in triglycerides, increase in vascular wall dysfunction and arterial stiffness.

He said hormone replacement of a low dose of estrogen, along with progesterone, reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease by half.

"One thing people should be warned about, however, is that this 'magic' form of HRT is not so magical for people who already have cardiovascular disease," he said.

Green said exercise, in addition to HRT, further helps to fight the symptoms and health risks associated with menopause.

"Women who exercise and take hormone replacement increase their blood flow and loose their arterial resistance," Green said. "The combination of HRT and exercise offer the 'bang for the buck' in reducing disease risk."

Green said he urges women to take responsibility for knowing the information of their condition when deciding whether or not to take HRT before consulting their doctors.

"In times of managed health care, it is very important that you go in [to your doctor] armed with the information about the pros and cons of HRT, and then make the final decision in consultation with your physician," he said.

USING BIRTH CONTROL PILLS AS A HORMONE REPLACEMENT THERAPY

Benefits

- Decreased risk of ovarian cancer, endometrial cancer and ovarian cysts
- Decreased risk of pelvic inflammatory disease
- Decreased heavy or irregular periods

Risks

- Slight increase in risk of breast and cervical cancer
- Small increase in the risk of coronary artery disease in women over the age of 40

JEFFREY SMITH/THE BATTALION

Astronomers discover planets

WASHINGTON (AP) — Astronomers searching for planets orbiting distant stars have found the smallest planets yet beyond the solar system, an important step toward being able to detect Earth-sized worlds that would have the best chance of containing life.

More than 30 planets have been found in orbit of stars outside the solar system, but the two planets announced Wednesday are the first to be smaller than Jupiter, astronomers said at a news conference.

"We have discovered the first Saturn-sized planets outside of the solar system," said Geoffrey W. Marcy of the University of California, Berkeley.

The new planets are thought to be hot, gaseous giants, rapidly orbiting their stars and are probably devoid of life, he said.

"This is an important milestone" in the search for Earth-sized planets that orbit stars other than the sun, said R. Paul Butler, a staff scientist at the Carnegie Institute in Washington. "This suggests there will be many more small planets out there."

A team led by Marcy, Butler and Steve Vogt of the University of California, Santa Cruz, found the new, smaller planets in orbit of stars more than 100 light years away.

Both of the new planets are slightly smaller than Saturn, a gas giant that is the second largest planet in the solar system after Jupiter, with 95 times the mass of Earth.

All previously discovered extrasolar planets, including 20 others found by the Marcy team, have been as big or big-

ger than Jupiter, which is 318 times more massive than Earth.

Butler said a new instrument attached to the Keck Telescope in Hawaii enabled the team to detect the smaller planets. The team is five years into a survey of about 2,000 stars and Marcy said there are six to 10 other star systems that "look promising" for planets.

"The discovery of Saturn-sized object is an extremely critical step toward finding terrestrial-sized planets orbiting other stars," said Heidi B. Hammel, a scientist at the Space Science Institute in Boulder, Colo. The terrestrial planets are Earth, Venus, Mars and Mercury.

The Marcy team finds extrasolar planets by observing and measuring the gravitational wobble that orbiting planets impart to the host star.

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