

March tidings—The news you need this month



Winter seems to be dragging on interminably, but there are signs of change: The days are getting longer, temperatures are moderating, and baseball's spring training is getting into full swing. Here are some breaking health stories to hasten your transition to the new season.

Milk—is it really a natural?

Our current Dietary Guidelines, promulgated by the USDA, encourage all Americans over the age of nine to consume at least three 8-ounce (one cup) servings of non-fat or low-fat

dairy from milk, yogurt, cheese per day. The chief rationale is that this will supply the requisite amount of calcium to forestall osteoporotic bone fractures.

However, surveys reveal that, on average, Americans consume far less: only 1.6 servings per day. Is this a problem?

That's the question tackled by the authors of a recent article in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. The comprehensive review was co-written by Walter Willett and David Ludwig, the former a plant-based diet guy who spearheaded the "EAT Lancet" report (which I've critiqued here), the other a low-carb stalwart—both at Harvard.

The thrust of their argument is that dairy for adults is overrated, and may indeed have drawbacks. They contend that current government recommendations lack a firm scientific basis.

They point out that, *"To increase milk production, cows have been bred to produce higher levels of insulin-like growth factor I (IGF-I), and they are pregnant for most of the time they are milked, which greatly increases levels of progesterone, estrogens, and other hormones in milk."*

This raises the question of whether dairy contributes to risk of certain hormone-dependent cancers.

As to osteoporosis prevention, they say that *"Paradoxically, countries with the highest intakes of milk and calcium tend to have the highest rates of hip fractures."*

With regard to the messaging about the vaunted superiority of low-fat dairy, they note, *"In three cohorts of young children, consumption of full-fat or 2%-fat milk was associated with lower BMI or lower risk of obesity than was consumption of low-fat or skim milk."* Moreover, *"Neither whole milk nor low-fat milk has been associated with the incidence of, or mortality associated with, coronary heart disease or stroke."*

They also give a nod to the potential harm that antibiotic, pesticide and herbicide residues concentrated in dairy products might cause, but acknowledge that not enough studies of organic dairy, untreated with bovine growth hormone, have been performed to demonstrate its superiority. But I believe the precautionary principle should apply here; if you consume dairy, choose organic products.

They steer clear of milk allergy and milk intolerance and its potential role in triggering migraines, GI problems, chronic sinus and lung conditions, and autoimmunity. But, as a veteran nutrition practitioner, I can vouch for the benefits of dairy elimination for many of my patients.

The article invokes the environmental sustainability argument, noting that milk production has a high carbon cost and cows produce a lot of atmosphere-disrupting methane. But this is an artifact of wasteful modern factory farming; new techniques of regenerative agriculture, where cows subsist on natural pasturage and their manure is returned to the soil, are showing promise in obviating the environmental burdens of dairy production.

The bottom line, they conclude: "In our opinion, the current recommendation to greatly increase consumption of dairy foods to 3 or more servings per day does not appear to be justified."

Healing Hospitals

A recent Medscape article considered the proposition that hospital design can facilitate better patient outcomes. It harkens back to a landmark 1984 study which highlighted the power of natural lighting and the simple expedient of a room with a view.

"Records on recovery after cholecystectomy of patients in a suburban Pennsylvania hospital between 1972 and 1981 were examined to determine whether assignment to a room with a

window view of a natural setting might have restorative influences. Twenty-three surgical patients assigned to rooms with windows looking out on a natural scene had shorter postoperative hospital stays, received fewer negative evaluative comments in nurses' notes, and took fewer potent analgesics than 23 matched patients in similar rooms with windows facing a brick building wall."

Amid the incessant clamor of beeping instruments, bright fluorescent lights, and disorienting windowless rooms, many patients develop ICU psychosis. Hospitals in Scandinavia in particular are being designed to address the fundamental human requirement for access to the healing power of nature.

NAC for MS

N-acetyl cysteine (NAC) is a precursor to glutathione, the body's master antioxidant. It's used in emergency medicine as an antidote to Tylenol overdoses, and in respiratory medicine as an inhaled mucus clearing agent. Its listing in the hospital formulary renders conventional doctors a little less skeptical than if it were an ordinary supplement, but it's readily available in health food stores.

In a study at Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia, MS patients were given NAC intravenously once weekly; on off days they were instructed to take one 500 mg capsule of NAC twice daily.

After two months of treatment, compared to a placebo control group of MS patients, they had significant improvements in brain function as measured by PET scans.

The researchers conclude: "This is an exciting study that suggests a natural molecule such as NAC may help improve brain metabolism and symptoms in patients with multiple sclerosis."

Big breakfast better for weight loss

“Breakfast like a king . . . supp like a pauper,” so goes the saying. Many studies have corroborated the view that weight maintenance is dependent, not just on the sum total of daily calories, but on the timing of their consumption.

A new study underscores this.

Volunteers who ate a large breakfast had 2.5 times the diet-induced thermogenesis (i.e. fat burning) than if the comparable meal was consumed in the evening.

Moreover, consumers of light breakfasts reported more hunger and more cravings for sweets than hearty breakfast eaters.

The study authors conclude: “Our data show that the time of day of food intake makes a difference in humans’ energy expenditure and metabolic responses to meals.”

Unfortunately, most Americans have skimpy, rushed breakfasts, and then snack their way to late night dinners, when they proceed to really put on the feed bag!

That concludes my recent news wrap-up! Keep an eye on your inbox next week when we’ll begin a special two-part focus on safeguarding your immunity—a hot topic in the news right now with the rise of the COVID-19 coronavirus.

In the meantime, wash your hands—thoroughly and often!