



# HEALTH BITS & PIECES

By Michael Janson, M.D. © 2008 Michael Janson, M.D.

◆ A new animal study suggests that the artificial sweetener, saccharin, may actually promote weight gain and fat deposition. Rats that were given either sugar or saccharin had different responses. Those fed saccharin ate more food and had a lowered metabolism than those fed the sweetener with caloric value (the sugar in this case was glucose). (Swithers SE, Davidson TL, "A role for sweet taste: Calorie predictive relations in energy regulation by rats," *Behav Neurosci*. 2008 Feb;122(1):161-73.) Artificial sweeteners have never been shown to have any health value, and have never been shown to promote weight loss or to help diabetics. It is possible that the sweet taste, even without the calorie content, increases cravings for sweets. In this study, the non-caloric sweetener altered metabolism and appetite more than the sugar. The same is likely to be true for other non-caloric sweeteners. Most of these sweeteners have had a number of reported risks (such as cancer and neurological problems). If this animal data is true for humans, then diabetics would be particularly at risk, as they often are counseled to use non-caloric sweeteners in spite of a lack of data supporting their value. Unfortunately, weight gain and lowered metabolism increase their difficulty in handling blood sugar.

◆ Researchers evaluated the health habits of 4770 men without benign prostate hyperplasia (BPH) at the start of the study and followed them for seven years. (Kristal AR, et al., "Dietary Patterns, Supplement Use, and the Risk of Symptomatic Benign Prostatic Hyperplasia: Results from the Prostate Cancer Prevention Trial," *Am J Epidemiol*. 2008 Feb 7 [Epub ahead of print].) Men with high fat consumption (particularly but not only saturated fat) had a 31-percent higher risk of developing BPH during the trial compared to men with the lowest fat consumption. High vegetable intake was associated with a reduction in risk of 31 percent, and drinking two or more alcoholic beverages per day reduced the risk by 33 percent compared to subjects who consumed no alcohol at all. (Two or more drinks per day is a lot of alcohol with other associated risks, so it is better to find other ways to reduce BPH through diet and maintaining normal weight.) Men who consumed meat every day had a 38-percent higher risk, but higher protein intake appeared to lower the risk by 15 percent. Other sources of protein include beans, nuts, seeds, whole grains, and vegetables.

◆ Whole grains have many health benefits related to their fiber content, vitamins, minerals, essential fatty acids, and other phytochemicals (none of which are found in refined grains, such as white flour). A new study shows that these foods (whole wheat, millet, brown rice, corn, oats, barley, rye, etc.) help with weight loss and reduce cardiac risk factors. Researchers studied 50 obese adults with metabolic syndrome (a complex of obesity, abdominal fat, high blood lipids, hypertension, insulin resistance, and a tendency to inflammation) and put them on a reduced calorie diet. Half were put on whole grains as part of the diet and half were put on refined grains. (Katcher HI, et al., "The effects of a whole grain-enriched hypocaloric diet on cardiovascular disease risk factors in men and women with metabolic syndrome," *Am J Clin Nutr*. 2008 Jan;87(1):79-90.) Both groups lost weight on the diet (due to calorie restriction), but those on the whole grains lost more abdominal fat than

the group on the refined grains. The inflammatory marker C-reactive protein (or CRP) was reduced by 38 percent in the group on whole grains, but not changed in the refined-grain group. Other studies have shown that whole grains reduce the tendency of the blood to clot by inhibiting excessive platelet aggregation.

◆ In a study of 2176 breast cancer patients and 2326 matched controls, exercise reduced the risk of breast cancer from 20 to 40 percent. Women with the highest levels of physical activity through heavy work had the most benefit compared to the sedentary controls. (Peplonska B, et al., "Adulthood lifetime physical activity and breast cancer," *Epidemiology*. 2008 Mar;19(2):226-36.) Women who increased their activity during their 50s had some of the best reduction in risk (27 percent lower). The benefits were consistent even for women who were overweight or post-menopausal, or those who had a family history of breast cancer. The risk of larger and more advanced tumors was especially reduced. Previous studies have shown the benefits of exercise in cancer prevention. One of the benefits of exercise is that it stimulates the production of Coenzyme Q10, a valuable antioxidant.

◆ The DASH diet (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) is the diet recommended by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute to prevent and treat hypertension. It involves increasing whole grains, fruits, and vegetables in the diet while lowering meat, chicken, and fish, and including nuts, seeds, and beans and some low-fat of non-fat dairy products. A new study shows that adopting this eating pattern can not only lower blood pressure but also reduce the incidence of heart attacks and strokes. (Fung TT, et al., "Adherence to a DASH-Style Diet and Risk of Coronary Heart Disease and Stroke in Women," *Arch Intern Med*. 2008 Apr 14;168(7):713-20.) Researchers followed 88,517 women for 24 years, and evaluated food-frequency questionnaires seven times during that period. Lifestyle and medical information were collected every two years. Based upon the food questionnaires, the subjects were assigned a score for how closely they followed the DASH diet. The researchers noted a clear association of the strictness with which subjects followed the diet (a higher score) and a reduction in the incidence of heart attacks and strokes. Women with the highest scores (following the diet most closely) had a 24-percent lower risk of heart attacks and an 18-percent lower risk of strokes. (Had they left out the meat and chicken altogether, then they might have done even better, according to other research.) A subgroup of the participants was evaluated with blood tests during the study. In this group, closer adherence to the diet also led to lower levels of C-reactive protein (CRP) and interleukin-6, both of which are markers for increased cardiovascular risk. This mostly vegetarian diet is most likely to provide a range of other benefits.

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