

The Lowdown on the Latest Weight-Loss Wonder

Okay, it's holiday time, and you know what that means! Temptation lurks around every corner: sweet-potato pie, eggnog, ham with all the fixin's. But if you over-indulge, don't plan on peeling off the pounds by popping a few chromium picolinate pills and then chillin' on the couch. A study conducted at the Naval Health Research Center in San Diego adds weight to the theory that when it comes to subtracting weight, there are no shortcuts.

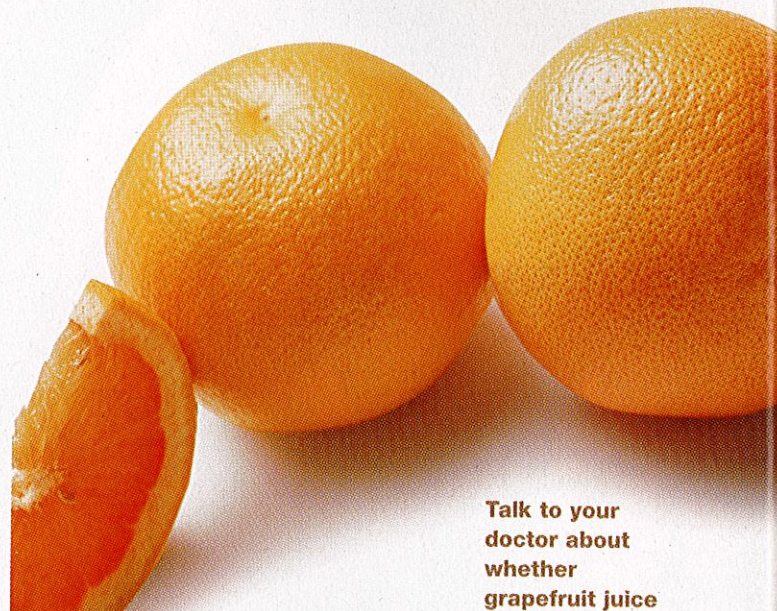
The 95 women and men who participated in the four-month study—all hefty members of the Navy—were split into two groups. Both groups had at least three 30-minute sessions a week of aerobic exercise, but one group also received 400 micrograms of chromium picolinate a day. The results? Folks in both groups dropped some pounds, but there were no real differences in overall weight loss or body-fat reduction.

But even if chromium is not the miracle weight-loss aid that some of

us can't help dreaming about, that doesn't mean you don't need this mineral. As study coauthor Linda K. Trent explains: "Chromium is involved in glucose metabolism; it helps insulin function properly. Without enough chromium—50 to 200 micrograms a day—insulin won't regulate the metabolism of fats, proteins, carbohydrates, and sugars properly."

Consuming mass quantities of chromium may not help you lose weight, but not getting enough of it could lead to a weight problem: "If you're deficient in chromium, your metabolism might be sub-optimal," Trent says, "meaning you may feel sluggish and have a slightly abnormal blood-glucose level. But the body will excrete extra chromium, so it won't do you any good to load up on it."

It's better to get chromium from food than from pills. Some good dietary sources: brewer's yeast, seafood like shrimp and scallops, whole grains, liver, mushrooms, potatoes, and low-fat cheese.



Talk to your doctor about whether grapefruit juice should be part of your Rx mix.

Grapefruit Juice: A Spoonful May Help Your Medicine Go Down

It's not to everyone's taste, but in the future, a dose of grapefruit juice just might be part of your prescription. Why? Because the tangy beverage helps some folks absorb certain oral medications more easily—especially blood-pressure drugs—according to research at the University of Michigan Medical Center in Ann Arbor. Scientists aren't sure what it is about grapefruits that causes this effect, but apparently something in them can offset an intestinal enzyme that reduces your ability to absorb drugs.

This news may be especially important for Black people in general and sisters in particular. Paul B. Watkins, M.D., director of the university's General Clinical Research Center, says, "Our work suggests that the grapefruit-juice effect may be more pronounced among Blacks. They generally require more of the drugs that seem to be most susceptible to the effect, which suggests that they're absorbing less than they should be anyway."

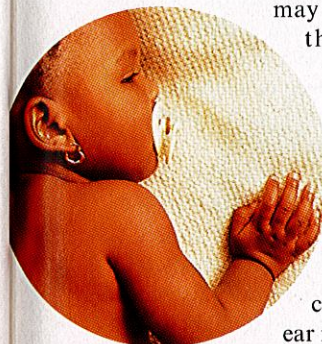
Regardless of your drug regimen, you definitely should *not* start supplementing it with grapefruit juice unless you have your doctor's A-OK! Watkins warns, "Your doctor controls your blood pressure by adjusting your medication over time; that way your medication is tailored specifically for you. By taking medication with grapefruit juice, you may get a bigger dose, which may not be a good thing."

holiday tip:

If you're prone to asthma or other allergies, open the windows before you start that Christmas dinner. Gas stoves can worsen upper-respiratory symptoms like wheezing, hay fever, and breathlessness.

When to pull out that pacifier

If you're a working parent, you've probably found that day care is a lifesaver. But you may also have found a downside: Your child seems to have an ear infection every time you turn around! If so, here's a tip: Check your child's mouth instead of those ears. If there's a pacifier sticking out of it, you may have just found the problem, according to a study at the University of Oulu in Finland.



Fact is, while your child is happily sucking away, viruses that can cause a middle-ear infection (or otitis media) may be happily breeding at the end of that bulb. Researchers found that pacifiers also increase saliva production (as if toddlers need help with that job!). Because saliva makes a very cozy home for viruses, the more saliva kids make, the more viruses they attract—and, in day care, share: "A child sucks a pacifier, shares it with a friend who drops it, crawls off, and leaves it for the next child," explains study author Matti Uhari, M.D., associate professor of pediatrics at the university. "These viruses are smeared around in an environment where kids are mouthing everything." In fact, according to study results, pacifier use was responsible for 25 percent of ear infections in children younger than 3.

Uhari suggests weaning your baby off the pacifier once he or she reaches 10 months of age, when the need to suck decreases and the risk of ear infections increases. —Susan Flagg Godbey with Therese Walsh

If Racism MAKES YOU WANNA HOLLER

Researchers at Duke University Medical Center and North Carolina Central University who investigated Black women's response to racist comments confirm what most of us already know: When our ears hear racist talk, our eyes see red—and our blood pressure and heart rate hit the danger zone. But the study suggests that while it may not be possible to remain totally serene in the face of ignorance, if you're gonna explode, you may be better off doing it in sympathetic company.

Thirty Black women ages 18 to 36 participated in two one-on-one debates with a White woman. (Researchers measured each participant's blood pressure and heart rate before, during, and after each debate.) Both debates covered controversial or challenging topics, but in one debate the White woman expressed racist opinions. In half the debates, a second Black woman acted as the support person for the Black participant, making eye contact and nodding in agreement; in the other half, there was no such support.

The women's heart rates and blood pressure went up more during the racist debates; in addition, women who did not have sisterly support reported feeling angrier than women who did get it. Lead study author Maya Dominguez McNeilly, Ph.D., says, "Past studies have shown that anger is linked to a higher incidence of heart disease and hypertension. The stronger your emotional responses to racism, the higher your heart rate and risk of developing hypertension."

Sickle-Cell Pain and the Power of Positive Thinking

For many sickle-cell patients, their greatest challenge is coping with the pain of the disease. Medication can bring relief, but according to a three-year study of 64 sickle-cell patients by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Duke University, coping strategies that minimize patients' negative thoughts may also help manage their pain.

The patients, whose average age was 33, were randomly assigned to two groups. Patients in the first group received information about the disease and how to cope with it. The other group, however, learned specific ways to manage pain, including breathing-relaxation techniques and mental imagery. The results? According to study coauthor Karen M. Gil, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology, "The group that received the coping-skills training coped with pain much better because they had fewer negative thoughts and were more active in their approach." Negative-thinking patients were more likely to report feeling pain and were more likely to be depressed and anxious.

If you or someone you love has sickle-cell disease, ask your health-care provider about how to get this kind of training. You can also call the Sickle Cell Disease Association of America for referrals to local counseling services. Call (800) 421-8453 between 8:30 A.M. and 5 P.M. Pacific standard time, Monday to Friday.

healthy-eye tip:

If you're thinking about buying those ready-made reading glasses at the drugstore instead of a prescription pair, think again: Without an eye exam, you don't know if you have glaucoma, a serious disease that steals sight and is five times more common among African-Americans than among Whites.

Give your baby a great start

Are you consumed by the desire to have a healthy baby? If so, you probably know that the single most important thing you can do is to get early prenatal care. And you may be able to improve your odds even more by taking calcium supplements.

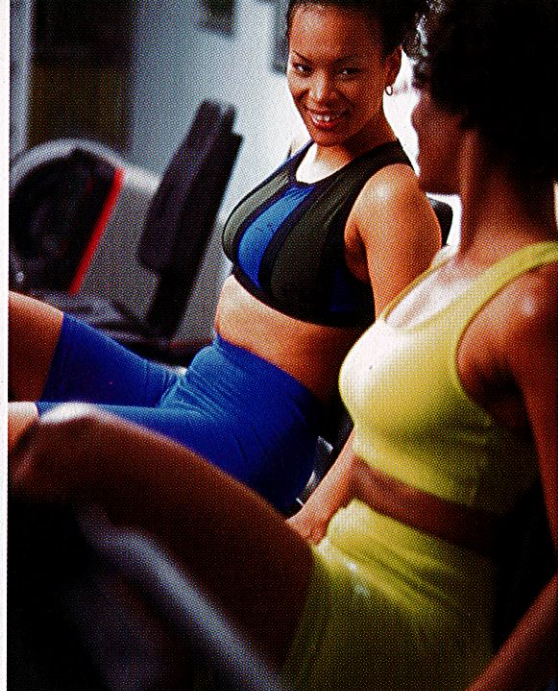
Researchers at two Canadian universities who analyzed 14 studies on the subject report that calcium supplements taken during pregnancy can lower your risk of preeclampsia—or high blood pressure that starts at least 20 weeks into your pregnancy. This condition, if not treated, can lead to the convulsive stage called eclampsia; complications include premature delivery and low birth weight.

Lead study author Heiner C. Bucher, M.D., M.P.H., says, “I would definitely recommend calcium supplements [1,200 milligrams] to women at risk for pregnancy-induced hypertension and preeclampsia who don’t get enough calcium in their diets.”

(None of the studies looked at the effects of calcium from dietary sources.)

If you had high blood pressure before becoming pregnant, or if this is your first pregnancy, you do have a higher risk of preeclampsia, but risk does not equal destiny! As Aziz R. Samadi, M.D., M.P.H.—an Emory University associate professor who led a study of Black women and preeclampsia—points out, “The

Calcium pills could help keep your pressure down during pregnancy. risk of preeclampsia can be reduced if you seek out early prenatal care. And if you have preeclampsia, it can be treated, and the complications will be minimal.”



You Gotta Move

In case you still need inspiration to get serious about your exercise program, listen up: A recent analysis of 13 international studies on the subject supports the theory that when it comes to estrogen-dependent cancers of the breast, ovary, and uterine lining, couch-bound women seem to be at greater risk.

Why is exercise so important? Says researcher Mary M. Kramer, Ph.D., formerly of Arizona State University and now at the American Cancer Society, “People who exercise have lower amounts of body fat, and body fat is a risk factor for these cancers. Exercise also enhances your immune system, and it might lower the levels of bad estrogen in your body that feeds tumors.” Researchers point out that folks who work out are also more likely to have other healthy habits, like eating right and going for regular checkups.

So how active is active? According to Kramer, “Thirty minutes, three to five times a week, of moderate-intensity exercise like doing aerobics, using a treadmill or stair climber, swimming, or cycling is optimal. But even lower-intensity activity like gardening and housecleaning is better than nothing.”

The path to a healthy heart

This news from Duke University Medical Center illustrates why lifestyle is so important to a healthy heart: In a study of more than 12,000 heart patients (10 percent of whom were Black), the Black folks were 40 percent more likely than the White patients to die from heart disease. Why? One major reason is that the Black patients tended to be sicker, with additional complicating diseases like high blood pressure and diabetes.

Both diseases can bring on heart disease at an earlier age—and cause cardiac patients to be in worse shape to begin with. The effects of diabetes are slightly worse than those of high blood pressure because diabetes affects many of the body’s organs, such as the kidneys and cardiovascular system.

Eric D. Peterson, M.D., assistant professor of cardiology at Duke, offers one simple piece of advice on how to adjust

this picture: “Prevent diabetes and hypertension through diet and exercise.”

Sounds like a broken record, doesn’t it? Fact is, though, these diseases are a ball and chain that African-Americans have to unload. And we can do it if we remember that both illnesses are primarily lifestyle-related: By educating ourselves about prevention and control, we can overcome these scourges—and give our children a healthier legacy. ♥