

Second-hand smoke may do more than harm children's lungs.

It seems to reduce levels of high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol and thereby increase the risk of heart attacks. This finding was among several new discoveries presented at the annual meeting of the American Heart Association, held in November. Among the highlights of the meeting, which was held in Dallas, were:

■ In a study involving 103 children with high cholesterol levels, Ellis Neufeld, MD, and colleagues at Children's Hospital and Harvard Medical School in Boston found that the average HDL measurement was 38.5 mg/dL in children exposed to second-hand smoke. Comparatively, children not exposed to second-hand smoke had an average HDL level of 44 mg/dL. Approximately 50% of the children who had been exposed to cigarette smoke had HDL levels below 35 mg/dL.

"If you reduce their risk even 10%, you're talking about thousands and thousands fewer heart attacks," concluded Dr Neufeld.

■ Ingo Stubbe, MD, of Deaconess Hospital in Boston found that smoking inhibits anticoagulation activity, thereby increasing the risk of clot formation.

■ Anticoagulating agents are saving more lives, according to the National Registry of Myocardial Infarction. The registry includes reports filed by more than 1200 hospitals. Overall, the number of patients who died of a myocardial infarction while still in the hospital dropped to 9.6%, from 11.2% in 1990.

In presenting these data, cardiologist William J. Rogers, MD, with the University of Alabama at Birmingham, noted that 30% of

women who have had myocardial infarction are receiving anticoagulation therapy today, compared with less than 26% in 1990.

Despite the advances being made in the administration of cardiovascular drugs, the "door-to-needle-time"—the time from entering the hospital to receiving treatment—still averages below the 30-minute threshold, recommended by government guidelines. On average, patients wait 47 minutes between the time they enter the hospital and receive treatment. Nonetheless, this waiting period represents an improvement from 1990, when patients waited an average of 62 minutes.

■ Drinking two to four alcoholic beverages a week seems to reduce the death rate in healthy men. Researchers at Harvard Medical School in Boston examined the death rate among male drinkers during an 11-year period. Compared with nondrinkers, imbibers had a 22% lower death rate. Fewer deaths related to heart attacks were recorded.

With daily drinking, however, the risk of dying matched that of nondrinkers. And when more than one drink a day was drunk, the death rate from cardiovascular causes as well as others, such as cancer, rose.

"Alcohol has complex health effects, with health benefits and hazards even for moderate drinkers," commented Carlos Camargo, Jr, MD, one of the study's investigators. "Clearly people should drink less than two drinks a day and probably less than one a day."

Because all of the 22,071 study participants were healthy male physicians, the results may not be representative of the population at-large, including how alcohol consumption affects the death rate in women.

Even when women consume fewer alcoholic beverages than men, the alcohol *concentration* in women's bodies nearly matches that of their male counterparts.

Investigators at the Research Institute on Addictions in Buffalo, NY, conducted a study involving 273 recovering alcoholics and 133 social drinkers. Both men and women participated in the study, which was funded by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA).

The participants' total volume of fluids was measured using a technique called bioelectric impedance. Among the social drinkers, men reported drinking 3.8 alcoholic beverages and women 2.4 on the days they did imbibe. After measuring the volume of body fluids in both sexes in this control group, the researchers found that the alcohol concentration in male drinkers equalled 1.16 g of alcohol per kilogram of body fluids, compared with 1.05 g/kg in women.

Among recovering alcoholics, the results mirrored those in control subjects: Consuming an average of 23.3 drinks on the days on which they drank, male alcoholics had an average alcohol concentration of 7.65 g/kg, compared with 7.83 g/kg of body fluids in the women alcoholics, who consumed an average of 17.8 drinks a day when they did imbibe.

The overall message is simple: "Women who believe they are protected from alcohol-related illnesses by drinking less than their male counterparts should heed this warning," emphasizes NIAAA Director Kenneth R. Warren.

Complete results of this study are published in the November issue of *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*.

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