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SECOND OPINION

the top 5 studies of 2012

A look back at some of the most important developments in the fields of nutrition and natural health

There's a growing trend in scientific research—wellness is now being closely linked with diet, lifestyle, and attitude. There is also more of an emphasis on using natural products over drugs. To that end, we've put together a list of five studies from the past year, all of which support this burgeoning shift in health care. Find out how you can benefit from these recent findings.

Growing Obesity Problem

Study: Wang Y, McPherson K, Marsh T, Gortmaker SL, Brown M. "Health and economic burden of the projected obesity trends in the USA and the UK." *Lancet,* 2011; 378:815-25.

Background: Currently, it's estimated that 8 out of 10 American adults over the age of 25 are overweight. As shocking as that may be, the situation is expected to get worse.

New Data: Based on mathematical models, researchers project that by 2030, there will be 65 million more obese adults. In other words, more than half of the U.S. adult population will be obese. As a result, scientists project the following health impacts:

- 6–8.5 million more cases of diabetes
- 5.7–7.3 million more cases of heart disease and stroke
- 490,000 –670,000 additional cancers

Commentary: These statistics stress the importance of finding strategies for successful weight loss. The key tool may be highly viscous soluble dietary fiber. Research has shown that PGX (a blend of highly viscous fiber) can promote weight loss; stabilize blood sugar; and increase insulin sensitivity.

Whey Protein for Fat Loss

Study: Baer DJ, et al. "Whey protein not soy protein supplementation alters body weight and composition in free-living overweight and obese adults." *Journal of Nutrition,* 2011; 141(8): 1489-94.

Background: In short-term studies, dietary protein has been shown to be more satiating than fats or carbohydrates. However, not all long-term studies showed that increased protein intake improved body weight. One factor may be the protein source. In particular, whey protein may support lean body mass during weight loss.

New Data: Ninety overweight and obese subjects were assigned to 1 of 3 treatments for a period of 23 weeks:

- Whey protein alone (56 grams/day)
- Soy protein alone (56 grams/day)
- An equal amount of carbohydrates

Results showed that whey protein—but not soy or carbs—helped reduce body weight and waist circumference.

Commentary: Whey protein helps improve body composition—lowering body fat while increasing lean muscle mass. In other words, whey protein is a dieter's friend, and here's why:

- Whey protein has the highest biological value of any protein.
- Whey protein is a rich source of branched chain amino acids that are metabolized into muscle tissue and used during exercise.
- Whey protein is an excellent source of the essential amino acid leucine. Research shows that individuals who exercise benefit from diets high in leucine and have more lean muscle tissue and less body fat compared to individuals whose diet contains lower levels of leucine.
- Whey protein helps stimulate the release of two appetite-suppressing hormones: cholecystokinin (CCK) and glucagon-like peptide-1 (GLP-1).

Saw Palmetto Impresses

Study: Sinescu I, et al. "Long-term efficacy of *Serenoa repens* treatment in patients with mild and moderate symptomatic benign prostatic hyperplasia." *Urologia Internationalis,* 2011;86(3):284-9.

Background: Numerous double-blind studies have shown that an extract of saw palmetto berries can improve the symptoms of enlarged prostate or benign prostatic hyperplasia (BPH).

New Data: This study attempted to evaluate long-term treatment with saw palmetto in patients with BPH. In the study, 120 men with mild or moderate BPH were treated daily for 2 years with one capsule of 320 mg saw palmetto extract. Results showed significant improvements in the International Prostate Symptom Score, quality of life score, and erectile function, and a reduction in residual urinary volume.

Commentary: Despite the benefits shown by saw palmetto in many clinical trials, in 2012 the prestigious *Cochrane Review* concluded that saw palmetto was no more effective than a placebo. The problem is that many studies have been conducted in men with severe disease, where saw palmetto has little effect. And when these studies are included in a review, the results skew negative.

In reality, saw palmetto is most effective in early-stage BPH. What this new study and others reinforce is the importance of taking saw palmetto extract early in the disease process.

Fish Oil And ADHD

Study: Milte CM, et al. "Eicosapentaenoic and docosahexaenoic acids, cognition, and behavior in children with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder: a randomized controlled trial." *Nutrition,* 2012; Jun;28(6):670-7.

Background: Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) affects about 10 million children in the United States, many of whom take amphetamine-type drugs as treatment. Studies show that children with ADHD have lower tissue levels of the omega-3 fatty acids eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) as compared to kids without ADHD.

New Data: To determine the effects of fish oils on children with ADHD, 90 children ages 7–12 were given either:

- An EPA-rich fish oil (1,109 mg EPA/108 mg DHA)
- A DHA-rich fish oil (264 mg EPA/1,032 mg DHA)
- A safflower oil providing 1,467 mg linoleic acid

Researchers found that an increased red blood cell level of DHA was associated with improved reading and lower parent ratings of oppositional behavior. Furthermore, when they examined a subgroup of 17 children with learning difficulties: increased DHA was associated with lower parent ratings of oppositional behavior, hyperactivity, restlessness, and other ADHD symptoms.

Commentary: The ratio of DHA to EPA in a supplement likely doesn't matter. A fish oil providing, say, a 2:1 EPA to DHA could show similar results, because a 3,000 mg dosage of such a product would provide the same amount of DHA used in the study.

Deadly Sleeping Pills

Study: Kripke DF, et al "Hypnotics' association with mortality or cancer: A matched cohort study." *BMJ Open,* 2012; 2: e000850.

Background: Most sleeping pills are "sedative hypnotics," drugs such as Ambien and Xanax that may also be used to treat anxiety and stress. These and similar drugs are associated with significant risks. Most of them are highly addictive, and poor candidates for long-term use. Side effects include dizziness, drowsiness, and impaired coordination. Because they act on brain chemistry, memory impairment, nervousness, confusion, hallucinations, and extreme irritability or aggressiveness may also result.

New Data: Daniel F. Kripke, MD, of the University of California, San Diego, worked for more than 30 years assessing the risk of sleeping pills. The findings in his most recent analysis are stunning, the most shocking of which being that people who take sleeping pills die sooner than people who don't. In fact, it's estimated that in 2010, sleeping pills may have been associated with 320,000–507,000 excess deaths in the United States.

Commentary: All told, there are now 19 studies showing that sleeping pills can lead to premature death. Fortunately, there are many safe and effective natural sleep aids including L-theanine, melatonin, 5-HTP, passionflower, and valerian.