

Latest in Health

Hypertension Drug . . . Asbestos Campaign . . . Dangerous Ticks

Deflating Blood Pressure?

An experimental drug has shown promise of reducing high blood pressure without the unpleasant side effects of drugs now used for that condition.

As reported in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, doctors at Boston University Medical Center tried the drug on 12 patients who were unresponsive to usual antihypertensive therapy. For all, blood pressure fell to normal levels.

Identified only as SQ 14225, the drug is being tested on over 100 patients in several medical centers. Researchers believe it works this way: As a modified amino acid, the drug can block formation of a hormone that not only constricts the body's blood vessels but also prevents another hormone from widening them. This allows the blood vessels to relax, which lowers blood pressure.

An estimated 35 million Americans have high blood pressure, increasing their risk of heart attack and stroke. For a small minority, severe hypertension means taking drugs which may be accompanied by side effects such as drowsiness and reflexes that are impaired.

"This new drug doesn't affect the central nervous system, so it is not expected to have any side effects," says Dr. Irene Cavaras of the Boston team. "If further studies bear out our work, this drug will improve the quality of life for those people who must take drugs to control high blood pressure."

Asbestos Alert

The government is aiming a new public-information campaign at an estimated 8 to 11 million Americans who have been exposed to asbestos in the workplace for periods of months and years.

These workers, says an advisory to the country's 400,000 physicians from the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, run a significantly increased risk of developing a range of cancers and lung diseases. It also lists steps for the diagnosis and treatment of patients.

On the rise, meanwhile, are lawsuits against the federal government

as well as asbestos-manufacturing companies for illness and death from job-related exposure to asbestos.

Diseases associated with asbestos exposure include asbestosis, an incurable lung disease; mesothelioma, a rare and usually fatal cancer of the chest; lung cancer, and certain gastrointestinal cancers. Dangers from



Workers exposed to asbestos in World War II shipyards now face health risks.

asbestos have been known for decades, but a recent article by Dr. Irving J. Selikoff and E. Cuyler Hammond in *Ca-A Cancer Journal for Clinicians* underscores the risks since World War II to asbestos workers in shipyards. The article cites the long latency period—up to 35 years—caused by as little as one month's exposure to this substance. Disease risk multiplies with smoking.

While the risk is greatest for asbestos workers, their families also show higher rates of asbestos-related diseases. Moreover, city dwellers are exposed to asbestos particles off brake linings, old buildings and air-conditioning systems.

A Preventive Drug for Diarrhea

Tests show that daily doses of the antibiotic doxycycline prevent "Montezuma's revenge"—traveler's

diarrhea—which most often is caused by a bacterial infection.

Findings reported in the *New England Journal of Medicine* by a group of scientists at Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions: Among Peace Corps volunteers in Kenya, only one of 18 taking the antibiotic incurred diarrhea, compared with nine of the 21 volunteers taking a placebo.

Volunteers took doxycycline or the placebo for three weeks beginning en route to Nairobi and were observed for two weeks afterward. The drug's protective effect seemed to last after the medicine was stopped.

Researchers point out that effects from long-term use are not known and that more research is needed before doxycycline can be universally recommended to travelers.

Spotted-Fever Warning

The number of tick-borne Rocky Mountain spotted-fever cases in the U.S. has risen from 937 in 1976 to 1,115 cases in 1977, an increase of 19 percent, reports the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta.

Southern states accounted for over half of these cases. Despite the effectiveness of antibiotics, illness and death occur in a high number of cases, say health officials.

They stress the importance of early diagnosis. Symptoms, usually felt three to five days after the tick bite, include a sudden onset of fever, chills and headache lasting for up to three weeks.

A report in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* says people should apply insect repellent on clothing when walking in woods and fields and remove all ticks carefully without crushing them.

Radical Breast-Cancer Surgery

Radical mastectomy for breast cancer is not found to increase survival chances compared with less-disfiguring operations, concludes a recent report in *Archives of Surgery*, a journal of the American Medical Association.

The findings are based on a study of 1,686 patients treated surgically for breast cancer from 1924 to 1972 at the Rockford School of Medicine, Rockford, Ill.

Confirming earlier studies, the authors recommend that radical mastectomy ordinarily done for breast cancer be abandoned except in special cases. This view is gaining acceptance by the medical community.