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PANCREATIC CANCER

Is nasty – it is usually discovered when it's incurable and it sometimes seems that it singles out the nicest people. The problem is that the pancreas is well hidden away and, often, by the time symptoms appear, it's too late to do anything about it. The good news - suddenly there's the prospect that practical/affordable and widely available early detection may be on the horizon.

MNT (medicalnewstoday.com) reports: "Cancer of the pancreas is more common in older people and affects men and women equally. The first noticeable symptoms of pancreatic cancer are often pain in the back or stomach area, unexpected weight loss and jaundice. The three main treatments for pancreatic cancer are surgery, chemotherapy and radiation therapy." It goes on to say: "Pancreatic cancer has a very poor survival rate and ranks fourth as a leading cause of cancer deaths in the US, where around 46,000 people a year are diagnosed with the disease. One reason the disease is so deadly is because by the time it is diagnosed, the tumour is too advanced for surgery to be an option – only about 15% of patients qualify for curative surgery. However, if pancreatic cancer is spotted early, surgery that boosts chance of survival is more feasible, say researchers from the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston." OK, OK ... we've heard all that already – so what's new?

MNT reports on a new blood test that looks promising. We're told that: "In their study the team shows how a protein released by cancer cells into the bloodstream could be used to screen for early pancreatic cancer." They are looking at 'tumour markers' called 'cancer exomes' ... and "The team suggests cancer exomes appear to be a more reliable way to screen for pancreatic cancer than using the more common CA 19-9 biomarker test. Using the cancer exome test, they found precancerous lesions in mice bred to develop pancreatic cancer before they could be spotted on magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)."

There's another test that, with luck, could be with us soon. A team at Barts Cancer Institute, Queen Mary – University of London, has been working on the problem. Barts is a 'centre of excellence' for cancer care and a lot of our patients go down there to be treated for leukaemias and the like.

Now Barts (St Bartholomew's to you) features in a report in Science Daily which tells us: "The five-year survival rate for pancreatic cancer in the UK is the lowest of any common cancer, standing at 3 per cent. This figure has barely improved in 40 years. There is no early diagnostic test available." Yea, yea - we know the bad news – so what's new?

SD goes on: "A combination of three proteins found at high levels in urine can accurately detect early-stage pancreatic cancer, UK researchers have found. The discovery could lead to a non-invasive, inexpensive test to screen people at high risk of developing the disease." ... "The three-protein 'signature' can both identify the most common form of pancreatic cancer when still in its early stages – and distinguish between this cancer and the inflammatory condition chronic pancreatitis, which can be hard to tell apart."

So this is a real advance which could transform the outlook for those who develop this disease. As ever, though, 'prevention is better than cure' ... and it's worth looking at how you can dramatically reduce your chances of getting this cancer in the first place. Try Googling *Cancer Research UK pancreatic cancer risk factors* (or go to

<http://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/type/pancreatic-cancer/about/pancreatic-cancer-risks-and-causes>) As you'll have guessed, the usual suspects appear in the line-up. "Cigarettes, cigars, pipes and chewing tobacco all increase pancreatic cancer risk. A large Cancer Research UK study looking at lifestyle factors found that nearly 1 in 3 pancreatic cancers (about 30%) may be linked to smoking." Conversely "Stopping smoking reduces the risk." Alcohol is also there in the line-up: "About 7 out of 10 cases of chronic pancreatitis are due to long term heavy drinking. Chronic pancreatitis is a known risk factor for cancer of the pancreas." And "People with diabetes have an increased risk of pancreatic cancer." As I say, it's worth having a look at the Cancer Research UK website to see the complete list.

SPORT IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE OLYMPICS

The William de Ferrers School got a boost from Ofsted which said: "Provision is greatly enhanced by extra-curricular activities, especially in sport." Elsewhere it's not such a happy story, however. Last month Tessa Jowell, the former Olympics minister, who is standing to be Labour's candidate for Mayor of London, said cuts to school sport money had been "wicked and negligent".

Now Dan Roan, BBC sports editor, reports that "Sport is facing a major overhaul in a bid to reverse recent disappointing participation figures." He goes on to say: "Amid increasing concerns that Britain is failing to live up to the legacy promise of the London 2012 Games, a public consultation has been launched to mark the start of a new strategy for sport. And the government has warned that the mounting cost of success for Britain's Olympic and Paralympic athletes is 'at odds with the current financial climate'. Almost 250,000 people have stopped taking part in regular activity over the past six months and a major shake-up of the way sport is funded will now be considered, with money potentially diverted away from national governing bodies (NGBs)."

We medics are always saying that exercise is the key to a long and healthy life (so do as we say ... not as we do!) Exercise does you much more good than most of the pills we hand out. In the aftermath of the Olympics it's clear that, to stop the rot, there has to be a cross departmental, joined-up, approach to sport.

Let's leave the last word to Dan: "The 2012 Olympics were won on a promise of a glorious sporting legacy, but exactly three years on, the consultation represents an admission that the country is failing to capitalise on that memorable summer of sport, and the £9.3bn it cost to stage."

EXERCISE BENEFITS FOR THE OVER 60s

Exercise brings HUGE health benefits at all ages – but here's a study that looks at just one age group. As we grow older we tend to slow down a little. Just a little moderate to vigorous physical activity, however – below the recommended amount - every week still seems to curb the risk of death among the over 60s, suggests an analysis of the available evidence published in the British Journal of Sports Medicine.

The health benefits of 150 minutes a week of moderate to vigorous physical activity are well known, but older adults often find it difficult to reach this target, say the researchers,

who wanted to know if any regular amount of activity below this level was associated with greater longevity in this age group.

They therefore trawled relevant research databases – looking particularly at MET minutes. (Don't switch off ... although this measurement of physical activity has an ungainly name - *'Metabolic Equivalent of Task (MET) minutes'* – all it means is the amount of energy (in calories) expended per minute of physical activity.

Pooled analysis of the data showed that clocking up less than 500 weekly MET minutes of physical activity was still associated with a 22% lowered risk of death compared with those who were inactive. The more physical activity you do, the greater the health benefit, reaching a 28% lower risk of death for those fulfilling the recommended weekly tally of MET minutes, while more than 1000 MET minutes was associated with a 35% lower risk. The good news for those of us who are busy and/or find it difficult to motivate ourselves is that the greatest benefit seemed to be among those who went from doing nothing or only a minimal amount of physical activity to doing a little bit more.

Much of the health benefit seemed to be for a reduced risk of dying from heart disease/stroke, while the reduction in deaths from all causes was considerably greater in older women than it was in older men. The data showed that a weekly tally of 250 MET minutes, which corresponds to 75 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity – or 15 minutes a day – was associated with health benefits, added to which the first 15 minutes of physical activity seemed to have the greatest impact, prompting the researchers to suggest that this could be “a reasonable target dose.”

The conclusion is: “Based on these results, we believe that the target for physical activity in the current recommendations might be too high for older adults and may discourage some of them. The fact that any effort will be worthwhile may help convince those 60% of participants over 60 years of age, who do not practice any regular physical activity, to become active.”

This is in keeping with a Cambridge Uni study which was publicised at the beginning of the year in *The Guardian* which told us that: “A brisk 20-minute walk each day could be all it takes to avoid dying prematurely.” June Davison, senior cardiac nurse at the British Heart Foundation, was quoted in the story. She said: “The results of this study are a clear reminder that being regularly physically active can reduce the risk of dying from coronary heart disease ... Whether it's going for a walk, taking a bike ride or using the stairs instead of the lift, keeping active every day will help reduce the risk of developing coronary heart disease.”

So the take home message when it comes to exercise is that 'Anything is MUCH, MUCH better than nothing!'

ADD SPICE TO YOUR LIFE

If you want a curry in SWF, you don't have to travel very far. Whilst the fat content of some curries may not do wonders for your heart and blood vessels, there are some benefits to be had from 'healthy choices.' For example ... eating spicy food more frequently as part of a daily diet is associated with a lower risk of death, according to a new study published in *The BMJ* this week. The association was also found for deaths from certain conditions such as cancer, and ischaemic heart and respiratory diseases. Previous research has suggested

that beneficial effects of spices and their bioactive ingredient, capsaicin, include anti-obesity, antioxidant, anti-inflammation and anticancer properties.

This is an 'observational study' so no definitive conclusions can be drawn about cause and effect ... but the authors call for more research that may “lead to updated dietary recommendations and development of functional foods.” Pass the Mango Chutney please.

Dr John Cormack