Cancer detection in women with dense breasts

Detection of breast cancer in women with dense breasts might be improved by using ultrasound.

Dense breast tissue and cancers both appear white on mammography, making the malignancy difficult to see. On ultrasound, however, cancers appear black. In a research study, 7,202 women with dense breasts were scanned. Of the 80 biopsy-proven breast cancers, 56 were found by mammography alone. The addition of ultrasound increased the number found to 75, while the remaining five were detected by physical examination.

More than half of menopausal women taking hormone replacement therapy, and more than a quarter of postmenopausal women have dense breasts. But the researchers say a randomised trial is needed before ultrasound use is adopted as routine.


New ophthalmic helpline opens in London

A telephone service to provide the general public, health professionals and patients with information about eye problems has been opened by London’s Moorfields Eye Hospital.

The initiative for the helpline came from an analysis of calls to the hospital’s A&E department, which showed that a significant proportion of callers could be given simple advice over the telephone. Moorfields Direct has run as a limited pilot project since last September and is staffed by experienced ophthalmic nurses.

Moorfields Direct is open between 9am and 5pm, Monday to Friday. 0171 566 2345. Calls are charged at normal rates.

Use of ultrasound can improve cancer detection

New treatment option for SAD sufferers

People who suffer from the winter blues might find St John’s wort helpful, new research suggests.

The study involved 301 people with seasonal affective disorder (SAD) – a condition believed to be triggered by lack of natural light during short winter days. The trial participants took three tablets containing a standardised extract of St John’s wort. Each participant scored their symptoms at the beginning of the trial, after a month and at the trial’s end. As a control, 133 subjects also used a light box.

The mean score of those treated with St John’s wort alone fell from 21.3 to 13 at the end of the trial and the difference became significant after four weeks. Comparable results were seen in the dual therapy group and there were no significant between-treatment differences.

For further information about St John’s wort or SAD, send a C5 sae to the St John’s Wort Information Centre, PO Box 321, Reading RG6 2HT.

Fibre not protective in bowel cancer

Dietary fibre offers no protection against colorectal cancer, according to the results of the largest ever study.

Dietary information was collected in a prospective study of 88,757 women enrolled in the Nurses’ Health Study. In the 16 years of follow up there were 787 cases of colorectal cancer and 1,012 cases of adenoma among the 27,530 women who were endoscoped. After adjusting for other variables, there was no association between fibre intake and colorectal cancer risk. The relative risk for women with the highest intake compared with the lowest was 0.95. No protective association was found for individual fibre types. The researchers say that fibre should still be encouraged because of its protective effect in heart disease.


Travellers’ children have less asthma

Although travellers are known to have poor health, new research suggests that boys in such families have a lower incidence of asthma than those in settled families.

A study undertaken in Cork involved 54 boys aged six to 12 from travelling families and 129 controls from settled families. In controls, 31.3 per cent had had wheeze in the preceding year, compared with 14.8 per cent of children from travelling families. Age and exposure to passive smoking were not predictive of asthma symptoms.

These findings reinforce research that shows that asthma is linked to affluence. Work undertaken in Germany showed that children from the east have less asthma than those from the west, although they are exposed to higher levels of pollution. Children from travelling families might be more exposed to infection which might offer some protection against asthma.