
UPDATE

Abstracts and news from the medical literature of interest to the primary-care physician

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Patient-Physician Communication Can Improve Compliance



Results from a telephone survey conducted among 401 California health maintenance outpatients (HMO) show an overall improvement in care for patients with depression. Antidepressant discontinuation rates, however, are at about 70% after three months of use.

Patients were given SSRIs (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors) for depression. Despite 72% of physicians saying they usually tell patients to take SSRIs for at least six months, 56% of patients said they received no instructions about therapy duration, and 20% stopped taking medication within three months, usually because of adverse effects or perceived lack of effectiveness. Significant factors associated with SSRI discontinuation in the study included:

- Being told by a physician to take antidepressants for fewer than six months;
- Not discussing side effects in advance;
- Experiencing at least one bothersome side effect;
- Lack of improvement after three months; and
- Having fewer than three office visits during three months of followup.

Bull SA, Hu XH, Hunkeler EM, et al: Discontinuation of use and switching of antidepressants: Influence of patient-physician communication. *JAMA*; Sept 18; 288:1403-9.

Are Allergies Bad for Your Mood?



Compared with non-depressed individuals, patients with clinical depression have been found to have higher rates of allergic disorders, whether self-reported or professionally diagnosed.

The link was found by researchers who assessed seasonal differences in rhinitis symptoms, mood and fatigue for one to two years in 32 seasonal-allergic-rhinitis patients and in 25 control subjects. Rhinitis patients weren't preselected for mood, fatigue or cognitive complaints and were not taking antihistamines.

Results showed that unlike the control group, the rhinitis group experienced mood changes during ragweed season, a decline in energy and positive feelings and an increase in mental, but not physical, fatigue.

Marshall PS, O'Hara C, Steinberg P, et al: Effects of seasonal allergic rhinitis on fatigue levels and mood. *Psychosom Med* 2002; 64:684-91.

Genes + Breast Density = Cancer?

Though previous research has shown women with dense breast tissue are at a higher risk for breast cancer, it remains unclear what role heredity plays. Investigators studied nearly 1,000 pairs of female identical and fraternal twins, between the ages of 40 and 70, in North America and Australia to find out.

For the study, mammographic density was calculated by readers who were blinded to the women's identities. In analyses adjusted for non-genetic factors that affect breast density, the percentage of dense breast tissue was correlated much higher among identical twins than among fraternal twins. According to a classic twin model, heritability accounted for 63% of the variation in density.

Boyd NF, Dite GS, Stone J, et al: Heritability of mammographic density: A risk factor for breast cancer. *N Engl J Med* 2002; 347:886-94.

Antibiotic Short Therapy Likely Effective

A double-blind clinical trial conducted in Pakistan between October 1999 and April 2001, testing the effectiveness of antibiotic therapy duration for non-severe pneumonia among children, suggests that short therapy is effective.

Two thousand children with non-severe pneumonia were randomized to receive amoxicillin for either three or five days. Fourteen days after treatment started the incidence of treatment failure was similar in the three- and five-day groups (21% and 20% respectively).

Non-severe pneumonia, according to the World Health Organization algorithm, includes elevated respiratory rate with cough and difficulty breathing, but not chest-wall retractions, change in mental status or cyanosis.

Pakistan Multicentre Amoxicillin Short Course Therapy (MASCOT) Pneumonia Study Group: Clinical efficacy of three days vs. five days of oral amoxicillin for treatment of childhood pneumonia: A multicentre double-blind trial. *Lancet* 2002; 360:835-41.

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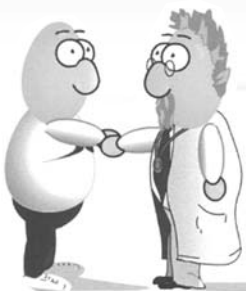
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Surgery Better Than Splinting for Severe Carpal Tunnel Syndrome

In a Netherlands study, 176 patients with severe carpal tunnel syndrome (CTS) confirmed by clinical and electrodiagnostic criteria were randomized to receive either surgery (open transverse carpal-ligament release) or wrist splinting for at least six weeks. Of the 89 patients who were assigned to splinting, 74 continued to wear splints after the six-week intervention.

In intent-to-treat analyses at three, six, 12 and 18 months, surgery was associated with better results than splinting for all outcomes (including overall success, pain, paresthesia, hypoesthesia and awakening from sleep with pain). For example, overall success at three months was reported by 80% of surgery patients vs. 54% of splint patients. At 18 months, this difference was still statistically significant (90% vs. 75%), although by that time 41% of patients in the splint group had crossed over to surgical treatment.

Gerritsen AA, de Vite HC, Scholten RJ, et al: Splinting vs. Surgery in the treatment of carpal tunnel syndrome: A randomized controlled trial. *JAMA* 2002; 288:1245-51.

Hands Cleaner With Alcohol

Hand washing is important for preventing nosocomial infections. However, poor compliance among health-care workers has led to alternatives, such as hand rubbing with alcohol. To test the effectiveness of hand rubbing, researchers randomized 23 health-care workers to either hand washing with medicated soap or hand rubbing with a waterless, alcohol-based solution. Bacterial contamination of hands was measured before and after hand-hygiene procedures for 114 patient-care activities.

Bacterial contamination was reduced significantly more by hand rubbing than by hand washing, with a median reduction of 83% vs. 58%. Mean colony-forming units fell from 271 to 35 in the hand-rubbing group, and from 232 to 69 in the hand-washing group. The median time spent on each type of hand hygiene was 30 seconds.

Girou E, Loyeau S, Legrand P, et al: Efficacy of hand rubbing with alcohol-based solution vs. standard hand-washing with antiseptic soap: Randomized clinical trial. *BMJ* 2002; 325:362-5.

Mold Sensitivity & Severe Asthma Linked

The severity of asthma can vary widely among patients, so in an international study, French investigators used data from the European Community Respiratory Health Survey to evaluate whether sensitization to molds, *Alternaria alternata* and *Cladosporium herbarum*, is associated with asthma severity. A quantitative clinical scale was used to assess asthma severity, and skin prick tests were used to evaluate sensitization to various allergens.

Of 1,132 adults with asthma, 564 had mild asthma, 333 had moderate asthma and 235 had severe asthma. Compared with patients who had mild asthma, those who had moderate or severe asthma were significantly more likely to be sensitized to mold, 11% vs. 16% and 22%, respectively. Multivariate analysis corroborated these findings. There was no such association for sensitization to pollens or cats. Similar patterns were observed in all geographic regions included in the analysis.

Zureik M, Neukirch C, Levnaert B, et al: Sensitization to airborne moulds and severity of asthma: Cross-sectional study from European Community Respiratory Health Survey. *BMJ* 2002; 325:411-4.

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