

age, family history, and risk factors (see *HMMHW*, October 2005).

Many American men were raised on a diet of meat and potatoes. Neither makes the grade as a health food, but a 2004 survey by the American Institute for Cancer Research found that 72% of adults center their meals around meat and other animal products.

You don't have to give up red meat

to be healthy, but the current evidence suggests that you'd be wise to limit your consumption. Learn to think of vegetables and grains as the main dish and meat as the side dish. Two 4-ounce portions a week should be safe; even then, choose lean cuts, trim away excess fat, and avoid charring your meat on a grill. Limit processed, cured, and salted meats as much as possible. Substitute

fish and chicken or turkey (without the skin) for red meat as your main protein source, and experiment with beans as a source of protein, fiber, and vitamins. It may seem like a radical new diet, but if you change gradually and encourage your family to join you, you'll find that a healthful diet comes naturally and is tasty and enjoyable. Your colon will thank you—and so will your heart. ♥

## Siestas and your heart: Can you nap your way to health?

**H**ere in the United States, many people consider eight hours an ideal amount of sleep—and most of them expect those eight hours to come in one block at night. But in Latin America, Mediterranean countries, and other parts of the world, the ideal slumber follows quite a different pattern. In sunny climates, people like to retreat from the heat and stress of a busy day for an afternoon siesta, then make up the difference by staying up late at night.

Cultural norms evolve to suit the needs and preferences of particular societies. But human biology is much the same in Athens and Chicago. Perhaps, then, a study of siestas in Greece will help Americans understand their own choices for healthful sleep. The study also raises the interesting possibility that a daily siesta may help ward off heart disease.

### The Greek Epic Study

To look for a link between siestas and the risk of heart disease, scientists from the University of Athens Medical School and the Harvard School of Public Health studied 23,681 Greek men and women. All the volunteers were free of diagnosed heart diseases, cancer, and stroke when they enrolled in the study between 1994 and 1999. They all reported on their napping habits; the researchers classified them as regular nappers, occasional nappers, or non-nappers. They also collected information on all the participants' age,

education, smoking status, employment, exercise level, diet, body mass index, and waist-to-hip ratio.

The subjects were tracked for an average of 6.3 years; in this period, 133 members of the group died from coronary artery disease. As expected, advancing age, smoking, and abdominal obesity were linked to an increased risk of cardiac death, while exercise, a good diet, increased education, and gainful employment appeared protective. Surprisingly, though, midday napping was also protective, especially for men.

Among the entire group, siestas of any duration or frequency were associated with a 34% lower risk of dying from heart disease, even after accounting for other risk factors. Occasional napping was linked to a 12% reduction in cardiac mortality, but regular napping appeared to reduce risk by 37%. The apparent protection was stronger for men than women; among working men, occasional nappers were 64% less likely to die from coronary artery disease than non-nappers.

### Wake-up calls

Two earlier studies from Greece support the possibility that midday napping may reduce the risk of heart disease, but a larger study from Costa Rica and two from Israel produced opposite conclusions. Is there something

different about Greece, or is there something different about the studies? Without discounting the unique characteristics of the Aegean nation, differences in the research may explain the contradictory results. The new study differed from the others by enrolling only healthy people; it also accounted for the effects of exercise—but the other studies did not. People who are ill often sleep during the day because of exhaustion or fatigue. By including them in the analysis, any benefit of voluntary napping by healthy people could easily be obscured. In fact, the Greek Epic Study reported the greatest benefit among working men. ▶▶

### Early to bed, early to rise?

Mediterraneans and Latins may be the masters of napping, but Americans may be more likely to observe Ben Franklin's prescription that "early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise." Was Franklin right? A team of Harvard researchers had the temerity to test his dictum. They evaluated 949 men who had been hospitalized with heart attacks. After tracking them for an average of 3.7 years, they found no relationship between early bedtimes (before 11 p.m.) or early awakening (before 6:30 a.m.) and death rates, income, or educational attainment.

It's still possible, though, that time is money, or that a penny saved is a penny earned.

If siestas are beneficial, how do they work? Stress reduction is the most plausible explanation and would fit with the observation that voluntary midday naps were particularly helpful to working men.

### The power(ful) nap

The possible cardiac benefits of napping will require more study. But there are other, well-documented benefits. Studies of shift workers, airline flight crews, medical interns, and highway drivers have all reported that naps as short as 20–30 minutes decrease fatigue and improve psychomotor performance, mood, and alertness. That's a big benefit to the napper—and to his passengers or patients.

### Napping niceties

If you nap, be sure it's because you want to, not because you have to. Sleep deprivation—from sleep apnea, restless

legs syndrome, depression, or any other cause—produces daytime somnolence that may make you need to nap. Sleep deprivation is harmful to your health. If you find yourself nodding off when you least want to, don't just give in to a nap. Instead, find out what's wrong with your nighttime sleep, then work to correct it.

A voluntary daytime siesta is a different matter. It can be pleasurable, refreshing, and even healthful. If you do take a nap, try to time it to fit your daily sleep-wake cycle; for most men, early afternoon is best. To preserve your good night's sleep, don't nap too long; for most people, 20 to 40 minutes work best. And expect to be a bit sluggish or groggy when you wake up, so give yourself at least 10 minutes to fully awaken before taking on any demanding tasks.

### Dream on

The Greek Epic Study raises the possibility that daytime siestas may help

reduce the risk of dying from heart disease. Since napping takes less discipline than a good diet and less effort than regular exercise, it's a hopeful possibility. But confirming studies are needed, and even if the association holds up, observational studies can never prove cause and effect. In this case, for example, siestas might be a marker for an overall healthier lifestyle rather than a unique way to protect your heart.

Remember, too, that it's easier to nap in Athens, Greece, than Athens, Georgia, particularly for working men. A siesta may reduce stress in Greece, but it may introduce stresses in the United States.

Don't count on naps to protect your heart—but if you enjoy siestas as part of a healthful lifestyle, nap away. And even if you can't fit in a nap at work, if you travel to Greece you may be able to do as the Greeks do. ♥



## ON CALL

### "Low-dose" smoking

**Q** I know that smoking is very bad for me. I've cut down to one cigarette after lunch and another after dinner each day, with two or three more on most Friday and Saturday nights when I socialize. I really enjoy smoking, but I want to know if I'm harming myself.

**A** Sorry to say, you are. The more you smoke, the greater your risk of lung cancer, emphysema, heart attacks, and many, many other medical problems ranging from mouth and throat cancer to bladder cancer and from premature skin aging to erectile dysfunction. But even at the low end of the scale, smoking is dangerous. That's why secondhand smoke is such a huge problem in the United States as well as around the world (see *Harvard Men's Health Watch*, August 2004).

Living with a smoker is one thing, indulging in two or three cigarettes a day quite another. A recent study from Norway should convince you to quit. People who smoked just one to four cigarettes a day were nearly three times more likely to die from heart disease than nonsmokers. Low-dose smoking nearly tripled the risk of dying from lung cancer in men, and it was associated with a 50% increase in the overall death rate in both men and women.

The only safe dose of smoking is zero, and the best time to quit is now.

HBS

Harvey B. Simon, M.D.

Editor, *Harvard Men's Health Watch*



Send us a question for On Call

By mail | Dr. Harvey B. Simon  
*Harvard Men's Health Watch*  
10 Shattuck St., 2nd Floor  
Boston, MA 02115

By e-mail | mens\_health@hms.harvard.edu  
(please write "On Call" in the subject line)

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