MASSACHUSETTS GENERAL HOSPITAL
Mind, Mood & Memory™

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Postmaster: Send address corrections to:
Mind, Mood & Memory,
PO Box 8535
Big Sandy, TX 75755-8535

NEWS BRIEFS

A FALTERING MEMORY MAY INDICATE HIGHER STROKE RISK

Memory lapses, particularly in well-educated individuals, may indicate vulnerability to a stroke, according to a study published online Dec. 11, 2014 in the journal *Stroke*. Dutch researchers examined data on more than 9,000 older adults who participated in a long-term study in which they answered questions about their educational backgrounds and memory performance and took tests measuring their cognitive function. Over a 12-year period, about 1,200 participants suffered either a rupture or a blockage of their cerebral blood vessels. The researchers found that participants who reported memory lapses at the outset of the study (often a sign of ongoing damage to the brain's blood vessels) were an average of 20 percent more likely to suffer a stroke than those who reported no memory lapses, regardless of their cognitive functioning. Highly educated participants suffered an even higher stroke risk: They were 39 percent more likely to have a stroke than were those who reported no lapses, and their strokes occurred earlier. The researchers suggest that individuals with higher education may have greater cognitive reserve, which may prevent them from becoming aware of changes in brain function until their risk of stroke is more severe, and should seek medical assessment to diagnose and manage hypertension and other conditions that may increase the risk of stroke.

USE OF "RISKY" BENZODIAZEPINES HIGHER IN OLDER ADULTS

Despite the well-known risks that they represent for older individuals, prescription use of a class of sedative and anti-anxiety drugs called *benzodiazepines* is highest in older people. An analysis of benzodiazepine use in the U.S. published online Dec. 18, 2014 in *JAMA Psychiatry* found that 8.7 percent of adults 65 to 80 years old received a prescription for the medication in 2008, nearly a third of these for long-term use. A number of studies have suggested an association between long-term use of benzodiazepine medications and dependence, impaired cognition and mobility, increased risk of falls, and increased risk for Alzheimer's disease (AD). The study authors recommended using safer alternatives to benzodiazepines, such as non-pharmacologic approaches and antidepressant medications.

CELLPHONE USE LINKED TO BRAIN TUMOR RISK

A new study has revived the debate over potential brain risks associated with the use of cellphones and cordless phones. Researchers analysed data from two large studies involving adults with malignant brain tumors, usually a type called *gliomas*. The scientists compared the tumor group, whose average age was 52, with healthy controls, according to a report published online Oct. 28, 2014 in *Pathophysiology*. The study found that the risk for developing glioma increased after one year of using a mobile or cordless phone and rose steadily with increasing hours of use. Glioma risk was three times higher than normal in participants who used a wireless phone for more than 25 years and significantly higher in those who began regularly using the phones before the age of 20. "Doctors should discuss precautions with their patients," said the study author, who linked the increased tumor risk with exposure to radiofrequency electromagnetic fields. He advised using hands-free phones or those with speaker capability whenever possible, rather than holding mobile or cordless phones to the ear.

BALANCE TEST MAY INDICATE RISK FOR COGNITIVE DECLINE AND STROKE

Scientists have identified a simple test of balance that appears to be an important indictor of brain health. According to a report published in the Dec. 18, 2014 online edition of *Stroke*, inability to perform the balance test was highly correlated with lower scores on tests of memory and cognition, as well as damage to cerebral blood vessels that indicates greater risk for serious strokes. The scientists took brain scans of nearly 1,400 adults with an average age of 67, and asked them to balance on one leg for a minute. They found that participants who could not balance on one foot for 20 seconds had more signs of microbleeds or "silent strokes" in their cerebral blood vessels than those who demonstrated better balance. Participants with poor balance also scored lower on memory and thinking tests, the study authors reported. **MMM**

Illustrations: Marty Bee