

HEALTH

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Iron Pills: Heartening News

BALTIMORE—About a year ago, newspapers were full of some frightening news: According to a Finnish study, too much iron might increase the risk of heart attack. Consumers began to have misgivings about their iron pills, even those prescribed for serious anemia. But it's beginning to look like the concern was overblown.

Cardiologist Michael Miller, at the University of Maryland, and pathologist Grover Hutchins, at Johns Hopkins Hospital, recently looked at the results of more than 48,000 autopsies. They were especially interested in 65 people whose medical records indicated they'd had a condition called hemochromatosis, which causes iron to accumulate in the blood and tissues.

If the iron theory is correct, reasoned Miller, these people ought to have been the most susceptible to heart disease. The researchers also examined the autopsy results of another 65 people, matched for age, race, sex, and time of death, but with normal iron levels.

While 11 of these controls had significant blockages in their arteries, only three people in the hemochromatosis group did. "They certainly weren't worse off," says Miller. "If anything, they tended to have less coronary disease." The three iron-loaded people who *did* have heart disease were also the only ones in their group with high cholesterol.

The idea that iron might affect only people with high cholesterol fits into the latest theory on heart disease, says Miller. According to this theory, "bad" LDL cholesterol

doesn't clog arteries unless it's first damaged by oxidation—and iron is an efficient oxidizer. If you don't have lots of LDL, iron can't do much harm. How much is "lots?" More than 190 milligrams, judging from the Finnish study and Miller's work.

"The important message is that the millions of people who need to take iron supplements shouldn't stop taking them," says Miller. People with high LDL levels who need iron, he says, should ask their doctors for help in assessing the possible risks of taking it.