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# THE YEAR IN MEDICINE

# TIME

## THE STEALTH KILLER

America's **HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE** crisis is spinning out of control. Learn about it, treat it—and maybe save your life



a major public-health problem in this country. Researchers, realizing that drug-resistant varieties are emerging from inadequate treatment both here and in other parts of the world, have launched the first North American vaccine trial in 60 years, using new formu-



las created with recombinant DNA technology. The results of the trial are eagerly awaited by public-health workers in the developing world, where TB kills nearly 2 million people each year.

**V**

**VACCINES**

Unlike most sexually transmitted infections, human papillomavirus (HPV) typically runs its course without causing illness. Fully half of U.S. adults have been infected without even knowing it. But in a small percentage of cases, the disease progresses to cervical cancer, which kills 4,000 women in the U.S. and 250,000 worldwide each year. Researchers have developed a vaccine that appears to be 100% effective against the two strains of HPV that cause 70% of cervical cancers. The vaccine may be available next year, but is likely to cause controversy if, as expected, it is



recommended for girls before they become sexually active.

**VIOXX**

The first hints that the pain reliever Vioxx might raise the risk of heart attacks and stroke surfaced in 2000, but it still came as a shock when drugmaker Merck announced in October that it was pulling its blockbuster drug off the market. Safety data from an ongoing trial had produced clear evidence of cardiovascular problems in subjects taking Vioxx—so clear that the trial was immediately halted.

Vioxx is one in a new class of drugs called COX-2 inhibitors, which were designed to be safer for treating arthritis pain than over-the-counter remedies like aspirin, ibuprofen and naproxen. Concerns have been raised about another member of the group, Pfizer's Bextra. The safety of Celebrex, the most popular of the COX-2 drugs, will be reviewed in the coming months.

The benefits of COX-2 inhibitors are real, but millions of patients are left wondering whether they were prescribed the new pills because they were better than older and cheaper drugs or because they were backed by multimillion-dollar marketing campaigns.

**VISION**

If you don't like contact lenses and you are one of the 3 million Americans whose corneas are the wrong thickness or shape for LASIK eye surgery, Advanced Medical Optics may have the lens for you. Called the Verisyse phakic intraocular lens, it is the first

**COLD COMFORT** A popular remedy, zinc may also relieve pneumonia and ADHD symptoms

permanently implanted lens to correct nearsightedness that has been approved by the FDA. In trials over three years, 92% of myopic patients with 20/400 vision or worse improved to 20/40 vision; 44% of patients achieved 20/20 vision. One thing to keep your eye on: the implants take a toll on the endothelial cells that keep the cornea clear, and nobody yet knows whether this loss is harmful in the long term. For the time being, the FDA recommends the new lens only for eyes with a robust population of endothelial cells.

**VITAMIN E**

On the hit parade of supplements, few are as popular as vitamin E. For decades, millions of health-conscious Americans have taken their daily dose hoping that its antioxidant properties would help ward off heart disease, cancer and even Alzheimer's. Yet a review of 19 clinical trials involving more than 135,000

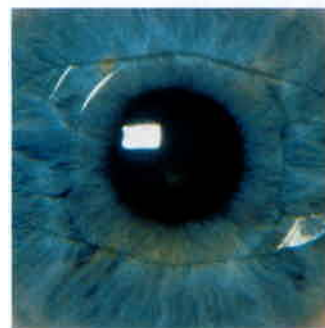
participants concluded that taking high doses of the vitamin (400 international units or more) may actually increase overall mortality and should be avoided.

The study was quickly rebutted by researchers defending E's virtues. While no one believes the vitamin will—or should—fall from dietary grace, don't expect the debate over megadoses of E to end anytime soon.

**Z**

**ZINC**

Studies showing its benefits are still not conclusive, but that has not stopped zinc from becoming a popular cold remedy in the U.S. And enthusiasm for zinc is spreading overseas. Johns Hopkins scientists working with colleagues in Bangladesh found that adding zinc to traditional antibiotic treatment helped children ages 2 to 23 months recover more quickly (by a day or so) from severe pneumonia. In Iran, doctors added zinc to the widely prescribed methylphenidate (Ritalin) therapy for children with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder and found that after six weeks, the kids on zinc experienced fewer distractions and had less difficulty concentrating. In that instance, the zinc supplements may be regulating the brain chemical dopamine, which controls feelings of pleasure and reward.



**CAN YOU SEE ME NOW?** Verisyse is the first permanent contact lens to correct nearsightedness