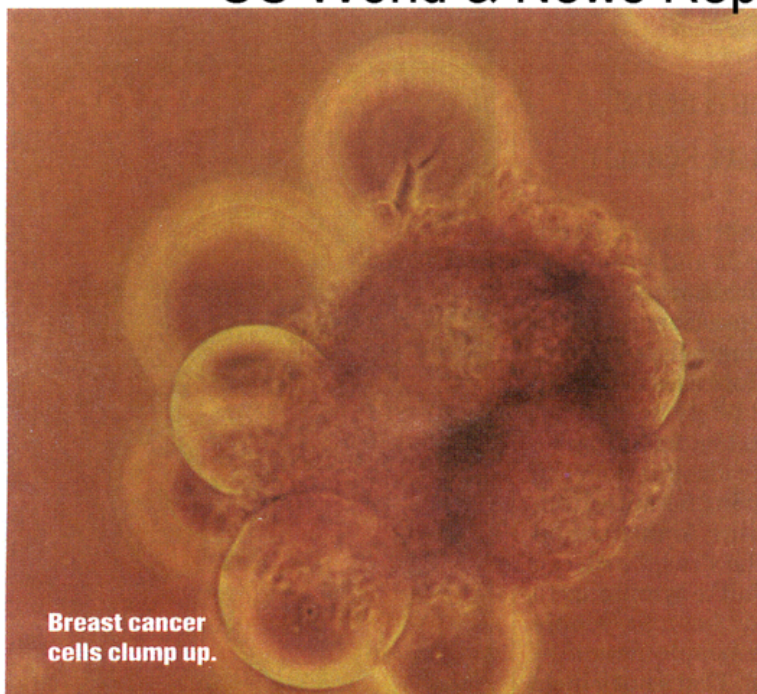


## Vital Signs

US World &amp; News Report, December 24, 2001



Breast cancer cells clump up.

## New breast cancer drug

**A** novel type of medication may help post-menopausal women with breast cancer more than tamoxifen, the current gold standard for many. The new drugs, called aromatase inhibitors, block fat cells from producing estrogen, a hormone that fuels the growth of breast cancer cells. But this type of blockade is so new—and so extreme—that some worry it may cause its own problems.

At a conference last week in San Antonio, researchers reported on post-menopausal women with early-stage breast cancer who took one of the drugs, anastrozole. They were 17 percent to 22 percent less likely to suffer a recurrence than were women taking tamoxifen. Another inhibitor, letrozole, helped women with advanced disease live up to a year longer. And unlike tamoxifen, these drugs should not increase the risk of endometrial cancer or dangerous blood clots.

The drugs may be so effective because, unlike tamoxifen, they reduce estrogen to near-zero levels. Yet such a drastic drop isn't seen in nature, and "we don't know the long-term consequences of that on the bone, the bladder, the vagina, and the brain," says Matthew Ellis, a Duke University oncologist who worked on the letrozole study. Unknown risks may be worth taking for women already battling breast cancer. But they would make it hard to justify replacing tamoxifen in its preventive role, now used to keep healthy but high-risk women from getting the disease. —Susan Brink



## FRACTURES

## Bad bones all over

Almost half of all women, after menopause, are at risk for weakened bones—a high number that comes from the largest study of osteoporosis ever done in the United States. "This has to be very high on our 'tickler list' when women come in for any kind of exam," says Warren Jones, president of the American Academy of Family Physicians, after reading the research in last week's *Journal*

CLARISSA FAHY/STONE



of the American Medical Association. The study followed more than 160,000 women for a year after measuring their bone density. Those with low density or actual osteoporosis were much more likely to get a fracture than were women with normal bones. Now density tests can be done in a doctor's office, and people with poor results can use weight-bearing exercises to stave off bad breaks.

—Josh Fischman

## EARLY WARNING

## Signs of stroke

A type of fat in your blood may predict stroke risk. In the journal *Circulation* last week, scientists reported on triglyceride levels in 11,000 heart disease patients. Those with high amounts—greater than 200 milligrams per deciliter—were almost 30 percent as likely as people with lower levels to suffer strokes. Re-

searchers had seen that people on cholesterol medications, which also lower triglycerides, had reduced stroke rates as well as less heart disease. While cholesterol levels can affect stroke risk, triglycerides turn out to be an independent factor. So for people who have heart trouble, doctors have a new alarm that goes off before stroke strikes.

—Thomas Hayden

## MUSICAL INSURANCE

## The HMO blues

For those on your holiday shopping list with health insurance gripes (and who won't shut up about them), stuff these in their stockings. Dr. Sam (ophthalmologist Sam Bierstock) and the Managed Care Blues Band have a CD ("free with \$14.95 co-pay" at [www.managedmusic.com](http://www.managedmusic.com)), with songs like "You're One Hip Mama ('Cause They Won't Pay for Two)." Or call 716-488-2608 for bulk orders of fake "WEDONT CARE HMO" insurance cards, which note that "holder may have to forgo diagnostic procedures or treatments that are deemed to be too expensive." Officially, HMOs don't see the humor. "It's a very... misguided approach" that stokes mistrust and isn't helping anyone, says Susan Pisano of the American Association of Health Plans. But Dr. Sam says he played "Oh Humana, Don't You Cancel Me" for some Humana health plan employees at a gig, and "they loved it!" —Holly J. Morris



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