A DEADLY connection

Pancreatic cancer (also known as exocrine cancer) affects the pancreas, an insulin-producing organ. It is one of the most serious cancers, spreading rapidly and rarely detected in its early stages.

Hope of reducing the occurrence of this disease may be found in a preventable factor: weight. Scientists surmise that excess weight plays a role because it affects insulin production and therefore the development of diabetes, which is a risk factor for pancreatic cancer.

Though the connection between being overweight and pancreatic cancer isn’t definitive, multiple studies have found evidence of a relationship. One study, published in the February 2005 issue of Cancer Epidemiology Biomarkers & Prevention, followed 142,627 men and women since 1992. They found that compared to healthy-weight people, those who were obese doubled their risk of developing pancreatic cancer. Apple-shaped people, particularly men, had an especially strong risk.

While this study did not demonstrate a correlation between exercise and pancreatic cancer rates, exercise is always a healthy idea. Physical activity has been proven to be a good preventive measure against depression and anxiety, high blood pressure, osteoarthritis, colon cancer, type 2 diabetes, and heart disease. —Galina Pembroke

Got chocolate?

Need a good reason for a sweet indulgence? How about decreased blood pressure?

Many studies have found sweet results with chocolate. The US National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine is recruiting people for a study on whether dark chocolate helps reduce high blood pressure by increasing insulin sensitivity.

Another study published in a 2007 issue of The Journal of the American Medical Association found that low, regular intake of cocoa reduced blood pressure. Read more about this delectable debate in Caroline Csiki’s article on chocolate as a superfood, on page 146. —G.P.

Heavy petting for emotional health

Can you feel yourself relax when you hug your furry friends? Then you won’t be surprised to learn that research is providing evidence of the benefits of pets on emotional health.

According to a November 2005 review in the British Medical Journal, “By providing opportunities for socialization, pets may reduce perceptions of stressful events, thus protecting against anxiety-related illness, and may give confidence that successful coping strategies can be found to deal with stress.”

These findings aren’t unique. A 2006 study in Current Arteriosclerosis Reports listed pet ownership as a protective factor for psychosocial stress.

Therapy Dogs International (TDI) has over 15,000 registered canines, all of them “emotional service dogs.” Though these dogs vary in size and breed, TDI founder Elaine Smith says they have one thing in common: “Their owners... have the unselfish desire to help others, taking time to ‘paws’ awhile for love.” —G.P.