

In the News

Don't wait to exhale

By Jeannine Stein
Times Staff Writer

September 18, 2006

Holding your breath while lifting weights — a common no-no for exercisers — could potentially increase the risk of glaucoma.

In a study published in this month's Archives of Ophthalmology, researchers asked 30 men who were regular exercisers and did not have glaucoma to do bench presses while breathing normally and while holding their breath. Their intraocular eye pressure was then measured during the exercises.

Pressure increased 62% while the subjects were breathing normally, researchers found, but increased by up to 90% when they held their breath.

Holding air in, says Dr. Geraldo Vieira, lead researcher and chairman of the ophthalmology department at UNIPLAC School of Medicine in Brazil, may lead to a compression of the thoracic veins, which in turn leads to increased pressure in the eye, although breathing during the exercise does raise pressure as well.

Glaucoma causes damage to the optic nerve, and eye pressure can damage the nerve fibers that make up the optic nerve.

Vieira adds that he often sees people holding their breath while working out. "Usually the trainer tells us not to do that, but sometimes we're not focused on this, so we forget about it and hold the air." He advises that people who regularly strength-train be tested for glaucoma, and those who have the disease check with their physician before exercising.