

## To Your Health!

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### Dietary supplements and herbal remedies

In our last two columns, we have introduced you to the world of dietary supplements and how to select quality products. In this column, we will review dietary supplements that appear to have benefits through evidence-based research. There is a tremendous amount of information available on dietary supplements and herbal remedies so we have narrowed this column down to a few that have proven to be beneficial or look promising. The information we used comes from the "Natural Standard" and the "Natural medicines Comprehensive Database". These sources are reputable and updated daily to give the most accurate and well-studied information. We will give special attention to fish oil because of the significant health benefits it offers.

**Fish oil:** Inflammation is thought to be a precursor to many chronic diseases of the 21st century. Some examples would include heart disease, cancer, autoimmune disorders such as rheumatoid arthritis, psoriasis, Alzheimer's and other conditions which are characterized by increased pro-inflammatory markers produced from omega 6 essential fatty acids that are present in meat, dairy products, vegetables and processed foods.

It is now known that omega 3 fatty acids from oily fish have important health-giving properties that have the ability to reduce inflammation in our bodies. No one fully understands the mechanism involved. Unfortunately, omega 3 is not as abundant in our diets as omega 6. Our consumption of fish has dwindled to a fraction of what it used to be. Another challenge is getting enough omega 3 from fish, especially with the toxins and pollution that are present in our oceans. Good sources would be from fish like albacore tuna and wild salmon in moderation. Eating fish a couple of times a week, along with taking a high quality fish oil supplement is the best way to ensure adequate intake. It is important to note that omega 3 is made up of EPA and DHA. It is important to find a supplement that is high in EPA. Too much DHA may inhibit the effectiveness of EPA so the ratio of EPA to DHA in the supplement is crucial.

There have also been some good studies showing a reduction in pain in some patients with arthritis. It is thought that this is due to a reduction of inflammation in the body. This could prove to be a safe alternative to non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (which are frequently used in people with arthritis), and looks very promising. Fish oil is one of the supplements going main stream. There is now an FDA approved prescription form of fish oil now available, called Omacor, because it works so well. All studies point to the positive effects of fish oil and suggest that everyone can benefit from quality supplement daily.

**Niacin:** Niacin is a form of vitamin B3. It is generally considered second-line therapy for lowering lipids (cholesterol) but it can be first-line therapy for patients who

need to increase their HDL (good cholesterol). It can also lower triglyc-

erides and, in high enough doses, can sometimes lower LDL (bad cholesterol). High doses of niacin have been effective in treatment of some patients with cardiovascular disease, according to evidence-based research out of Scripps Center for Integrative Medicine in San Diego. Immediate release forms seem to be the most effective. High doses are often required for effective treatment and can cause a "flushing" which some patients don't tolerate well. Don't give up on Niacin, though, as there is a simple strategy that can prevent or reduce the amount of flushing people experience. There is some evidence that it can be effective in treating people with atherosclerosis (hardening of the arteries) and reducing the risk of a second heart attack in some men. Other possible uses are under study.

**Vitamin D:** Vitamin D is found in small amounts in many foods, such as dairy products, cereals with vitamin D added and fish, but 80 to 90 percent of vitamin D comes from skin exposure to the sun. Aging affects the ability of our skin to produce Vitamin D. A person who is 65 years-old needs 2 to 3 times the amount of vitamin D because their skin produces only 25 percent of what it produces in a person in their 20s and 30s. It is often overlooked as a necessary component for preventing and treating osteoporosis. It is crucial to the absorption of calcium and helps to maintain normal calcium levels in our blood. People with below average vitamin D levels don't seem to get any benefit from calcium. Some studies suggest that vitamin D without calcium might be beneficial in preventing fractures. Vitamin D deficiency is linked to increased risk of falling. Calcium is thought to reduce the risk of colon cancer, but without adequate amounts of Vitamin D, that benefit is lost.

It is felt that because many of us spend less time outdoors and are more cautious about sun exposure that we are not producing adequate amounts of vitamin D. Geography can be a factor as well. Studies have shown that even in sunny areas like San Diego, a significant number of people were vitamin D deficient.

**Saw Palmetto:** Information about Saw Palmetto has been around for a while and studies continue. It is believed to likely be effective in treating the symptoms of an enlarged prostate. It seems to moderately reduce symptoms of BPH (benign prostatic hypertrophy). Some evidence suggests that it might work about as well as some prescription medications in certain people, but it takes about two months of treatment for symptoms to improve. It does not decrease the overall size of the prostate but appears to shrink the lining that puts pressure on the tubes that carry urine, so reduces the difficulty with urination associated with BPH. This is one to watch for emerging information supporting its use in some men.

**Turmeric:** This herb is being studied and shows promise in relieving some of the symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis. I recently attended a conference on dietary supplements and herbal remedies and turmeric was showing promise in evidence-based research for reducing inflammation and decreasing pain in patients for joint pain from osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis. This is also looks promising and is one to watch.

This information barely reflects the tip of the iceberg. There continue to be committed researchers studying the benefits of dietary supplements and herbal treatments. The bottom line is that we need a variety of vitamins and minerals to support health. It has become more and more difficult to meet our nutrient requirements through diet alone. Produce is often picked, stored and transported great distances, then it sits on the grocery store shelves for extended periods. Fast food and processed food have become the main food source for many of us. We all need a healthy, balanced diet, regular exercise and to maintain a healthy weight, but the epidemic of obesity in this country demonstrates that it isn't happening. We need to work on stress reduction, too, but that can be challenging in the world we live in. Despite the challenges, we all need to find ways to make changes in our daily lives

by taking steps toward healthier lifestyles. We need to team up and get the support of family and friends, and work with our health

Please see page 20



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