

PUT YOUR HEART INTO HEALTH: NATUROPATHIC APPROACHES TO HEART HEALTH

By Allana Polo, ND

February is heart health month and it is a time to focus on taking good care of this vital muscle. As I write this, my heart is hard at work: in a single day it beats at least 100,000 times and pumps from 2,500 to 5,000 gallons of blood through my blood vessels. Blood traverses a highway, transporting oxygen and nutrients and removing carbon dioxide and waste. We need this highway operating optimally for our heart to remain strong. Sometimes plaque can form and line our blood vessels. This hardening of the arteries causes decreased blood flow to the heart, which causes the heart to work harder, a condition known as coronary artery disease. Plaque forms when the lining of the artery is damaged and there are high levels of LDL cholesterol (and low levels of HDL cholesterol). A heart attack occurs when this lack of blood flow causes heart cells to die. A stroke occurs when blood flow to the brain is interrupted, or when there is a rupture of blood vessels in the brain.

Symptoms of heart disease can include:

- Fatigue with physical exertion
- Shortness of breath
- Sleep disturbances
- Weakness, dizziness
- Indigestion
- Anxiety
- Tightness in the chest

We need to care for our heart muscle through optimal nutrition, including supplementation when necessary. Poor nutrition, such as diets rich in sodium, cholesterol and excess animal fat, can contribute to the development of heart disease, as can a sedentary lifestyle, smoking, obesity and excessive alcohol intake. Genetics are also known to play a part, with some people being at increased risk of developing heart disease because of heredity. Risk of heart disease also increases with age. You can protect yourself, in the best way, through the following principles of good health:

- Eat a diet rich in whole, unprocessed foods (plenty of fruits, vegetables, whole grains and lean proteins) to ensure you are feeding your body the right nutrients for optimal performance, like the B vitamins (reach for green leafy vegetables to boost your B vitamins).
- Limit animal protein, known to contain high levels of cholesterol and fats.
- Avoid sugar and sweets in order to maintain more stable blood sugar levels.
- Maintain a healthy weight (as measured by the Body Mass Index). Obesity, particularly fat carried around the middle, is a known risk factor for heart disease.
- Quit smoking, which increases your risk of heart disease by 3 times.
- Avoid excessive alcohol. This is too taxing for your liver.
- Get active to improve heart function.
- Drink plenty of water to better lubricate the cells of the body.
- Manage stress, which puts your body at risk for many ailments including high blood pressure, a risk factor for heart disease.

- Limit Caffeine to 1 to 2 cups a day. Coffee is both acidic and dehydrating and studies show that people who drink large amounts of it (more than 4 cups a day) have increased risk of heart disease.

It might also be helpful to increase fiber, enjoy a variety of anti-inflammatory foods like onions and garlic, and season with cayenne pepper, known to stimulate blood flow. Soy products have also been found to reduce heart disease, though I recommend these in moderation for other reasons.

I also suggest the following supplements for optimal heart health. Through supplements we can gain higher levels of important vitamins and minerals that we may not be able to get through food alone.

Omega-3 Our bodies need omega-3 fatty acids for the normal growth of blood vessels and nerves. You can incorporate foods rich in omega-3 into your diet, such as salmon, flax seed and walnuts, but to reach optimal levels, look into supplementing with a good quality fish oil, or other omega-3 rich oil (such as flax oil).

Hawthorne Berry The hawthorne berry can help prevent heart disease and can effectively help in the treatment of heart disease. It dilates the coronary arteries, decreases cholesterol, and strengthens the heart muscle contractions.

Magnesium Magnesium is an important mineral that the body needs and is found in more than 300 different enzymes the body produces! Because it reduces the risk of heart attack, it is good to be sure you are not deficient in this mineral. Supplementation with additional magnesium can regulate heart rhythm.

Resveratrol Red wine, consumed in moderation, has been shown to help prevent heart disease. Many people believe it is the naturally occurring presence of resveratrol in the red wine that has this nice effect. You can get the beneficial effects of resveratrol without the negative impact of alcohol through supplementation.

You can maintain a healthy heart - this month and all year - by making important changes to your diet and lifestyle. Reduce your risk factors by following my suggestions, and talk to your Naturopathic Doctor about a supplement program to improve the overall functioning of the body's most important muscle.

