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Welcome to Natural Health Review Issue 20.

We have an interesting variety of remedies this month, ranging from a prebiotic and a synbiotic to green tea and goji juice. Acupuncture again shows its benefits in patients with tension-type headache, and tanning bed sessions provide relief for fibromyalgia sufferers.

I hope you enjoy this issue and look forward to receiving your feedback.

Kind Regards,

Dr Shaun Holt

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Vitamin C may improve blood pressure

The facts:

- A study of 242 healthy adults found that vitamin C may influence blood pressure levels.
- Subjects had their blood pressure and ascorbic acid levels examined over a 10-year period.
- After adjustment for contributing factors, those people with the highest levels of plasma ascorbic acid also had the lowest blood pressure.

Dr Shaun Holt:

My regular warning applies to the results of this study: an association does not prove causation. Bearing in mind this caveat, it appears that vitamin C may help to reduce blood pressure, providing yet another reason to make sure that you have enough in your diet or as a supplement. Vitamin C was shown to prevent scurvy in 1747 in what was probably the first ever controlled clinical trial, undertaken by British Royal Navy surgeon James Lind. He also tested cider, vinegar, sulphuric acid and seawater, but it was the addition of two oranges and a lemon a day to the diet that worked.



<http://dx.doi.org/10.1186/1475-2891-7-35>

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Low vitamin D linked to higher risk of dementia

The facts:

- 1766 elderly adults were assessed to see if there was any link between cognitive function and vitamin D levels.
- After adjustment for any influencing factors, subjects with the lowest serum vitamin D levels were found to be at the highest risk for cognitive impairment, and vice versa.
- These data suggest that low serum levels of vitamin D are associated with an increased risk of cognitive impairment.

Dr Shaun Holt:

More work is needed, but the findings from this study, if confirmed, would represent a huge step forward in the prevention of the mental decline that often occurs as people age. Around 1/3 of people aged over 65 die with dementia according to the UK Alzheimer's Society. Previous animal and laboratory studies have suggested that vitamin D could have a beneficial effect on cognitive function. Vitamin D has been recommended for older people as a way of maintaining bone health and these findings provide another reason to take a vitamin D supplement, especially for older people who do not have much exposure to sunshine.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0891988708327888>



Synbiotic may improve gut health in elderly

The facts:

- Healthy elderly volunteers were asked to eat a synbiotic (combination of lactitol and Lactobacillus acidophilus NCFM) twice daily or a placebo for 2 weeks.
- After 2 weeks, stool frequency was improved in the synbiotic group and faecal L. acidophilus NCFM levels were significantly increased.
- These results suggest that eating lactitol combined with L. acidophilus NCFM twice daily may improve intestinal health in the elderly.

Dr Shaun Holt:

I've previously discussed studies on prebiotics and probiotics, so what is a synbiotic? The answer is...both! They are supplements that contain both prebiotics and probiotics and can potentially provide the benefits of both in terms of promoting healthy bowel bacteria. This study in healthy elderly people found just that, with improvements being observed in several indicators of bowel microbial functioning.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0007114508003097>

Prebiotic may offer ray of light for IBS sufferers

The facts:

- 44 patients with irritable bowel syndrome received either a novel prebiotic or placebo for 12 weeks before switching to the alternate treatment for 12 weeks.
- Gut bifidobacteria were significantly stimulated during treatment with the prebiotic and irritable bowel symptoms such as stool consistency, flatulence, bloating and anxiety all improved.
- This prebiotic has therapeutic potential in patients with irritable bowel because it changes colonic microflora and improves symptoms.

Dr Shaun Holt:

This small study found that a prebiotic significantly improved the symptoms of people with irritable bowel syndrome. Prebiotics are non-digestible food ingredients that stimulate bowel bacteria and improve health. Prebiotics are usually complicated carbohydrates which are not often present in large quantities in a typical Western diet. The results from this study are particularly interesting as irritable bowel syndrome is a condition that is difficult to treat using conventional medicines.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2036.2008.03911.x>



Independent commentary by Dr Shaun Holt, BPharm (hons), MBChB (hons)



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Green tea catechins linked to weight loss

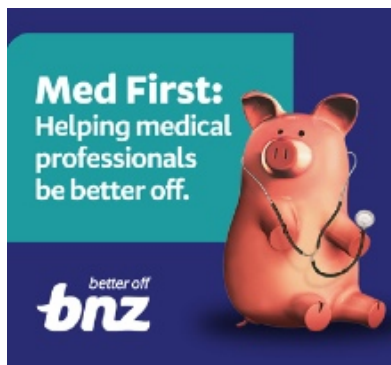
The facts:

- 107 volunteers received a green tea catechin beverage or a non-catechin beverage daily for 12 weeks, while at the same time maintaining constant energy intake and moderate exercise.
- Compared with non-catechin drinkers, people who drank green tea tended to lose weight and had greater losses in abdominal fat and serum triglycerides.
- These findings suggest that drinking green tea enhances exercise-induced changes in abdominal fat and serum triglycerides.

Dr Shaun Holt:

Catechins are a type of antioxidant found in some plants, especially teas and cocoas and make up around 25% of the dry weight of fresh tea leaves. They have been shown to help heart disease in animals and reduce the cancer-forming process in test tube studies. This study found that green tea catechins increased the reduction of abdominal fat that occurred with exercise, providing another reason to consider making green tea your brew of choice.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.3945/jn.108.098293>



Green tea may protect against breast cancer

The facts:

- The effects of green tea on breast cancer risk were evaluated in over 6000 women with or without breast cancer living in Shanghai.
- All the women were interviewed about green tea drinking habits, including age of initiation, duration of use, brew strength and quantity of tea.
- Regular consumption of green tea was associated with a slight reduction in breast cancer risk.

Dr Shaun Holt:

This was not the strongest of studies, but it did find that women in Shanghai had a reduced risk of breast cancer if they consumed more green tea. As we've discussed previously, green tea differs from regular black tea in that there is little oxidation of the tea during its production. Green teas have around one third of the caffeine content of coffee and have been used as a traditional medicine in many parts of the world for thousands of years.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.3945/jn.108.098699>



Phytosterols for cholesterol cuts

The facts:

- The findings of 84 well-controlled trials were pooled to determine the LDL cholesterol-lowering effects of phytosterols.
- It was calculated that an average daily dose of 2.15g phytosterols would reduce LDL-cholesterol by 0.34 mmol/L (8.8%).
- No significant differences were found between dose responses for plant sterols vs. stanols, fat-based vs. nonfat-based food and dairy vs. nondairy food.

Dr Shaun Holt:

A well conducted meta-analysis such as this one provides some of the strongest evidence possible and the finding from adding over 80 studies was that phytosterols in food lower LDL-cholesterol. A dose-response relationship was found ie. more phytosterol led to a greater reduction. The authors said that 2 grams a day of phytosterols (the recommended amount) would reduce LDL-cholesterol by around 10% and this would reduce coronary heart disease by around 10-20%. Phytosterols occur naturally in many vegetable oils and are used as a food additive.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.3945/jn.108.095125>



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Goji juice has antioxidant effects

The facts:

- This study investigated the antioxidant effects of half a glass of GoChi juice (containing goji extract) daily for 30 days in healthy Chinese adults.
- Antioxidant markers increased significantly in people who drank GoChi compared with placebo.
- Based on these findings, continued consumption of GoChi juice beyond 30 days would probably protect against free radical-related damage.



Dr Shaun Holt:

This study showed that goji extract had antioxidant activity in human trial participants. Goji berry is the commercial name that is often used for wolfberry extracts. Wolfberry are perennial plants found mostly in China and have been used for nearly 2000 years in traditional Chinese medicine. The very high antioxidant levels of goji extracts have earned them the title of a superfruit and they are traditionally used to treat inflammatory and skin diseases.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.nutres.2008.11.005>

Acupuncture for tension-type headache

The facts:

- The results from 11 trials comparing the effects of acupuncture, routine care or sham acupuncture were pooled to assess the efficacy of acupuncture in patients with tension-type headache.
- Patients who received acupuncture had fewer headaches than those who received routine care or sham acupuncture in the short term; long term effects were not studied.
- These results suggest that acupuncture could be useful in patients with frequent episodic or chronic tension-type headaches.

Dr Shaun Holt:

This Cochrane review is hugely important. 11 studies were included in the review and the conclusion was that, although much of the benefit of acupuncture in terms of treating headaches was obtained no matter where the needles were placed (sham acupuncture), additional benefits were seen when the needles were placed in the correct places on the body. Although acupuncture cannot be explained at all by Western systems of medicine, robust research shows that it works and this is more important than knowing the exact mechanism by which the results are achieved.

<http://www.mrw.interscience.wiley.com/cochrane/clsysrev/articles/CD007587/frame.html>

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UV light improves pain and mood in fibromyalgia

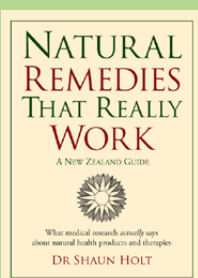
The facts:

- 19 patients with fibromyalgia were treated with UV light via a tanning bed for 2 months to see if their pain levels improved.
- Patients reported a more positive mood and reduced pain levels after the first 2 weeks of UV treatment compared with untreated patients, and the reduction in pain was maintained during a further 6 weeks' treatment.
- Tanning beds appear to have potential in reducing pain and improving mood in people with fibromyalgia.

Dr Shaun Holt:

Many people with fibromyalgia look for alternative and natural remedies, as traditional medicine often fails to adequately treat the pain associated with this condition, which causes widespread muscle and connective tissue pain. Anecdotal evidence is interesting but can often be wrong and so it is crucial to undertake small initial clinical trials to test whether anecdotal reports of a new treatment are actually true. This small study did just that and found that reports that UV light could help this condition were confirmed in a small trial. If the results are confirmed in larger trials then this treatment can be strongly recommended.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1089/acm.2008.0167>



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