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Welcome to Natural Health Review Issue 15.

This month we focus on some excellent papers on hypertension and the therapeutic options for high blood pressure. There are also a couple of interesting articles relating to the use of Probiotics for childhood constipation and for stress-related gastrointestinal problems.

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

Kind Regards,

Dr Shaun Holt

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Beneficial effects of a polyunsaturated fatty acid

The facts:

- Intake of the polyunsaturated fatty acid docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) during the third trimester of pregnancy is critically important for infant brain development, according to the findings of a study in Inuits in Arctic Quebec.
- Higher cord plasma levels of DHA were found to be associated with longer gestation, as well as better visual, cognitive and motor development in the infants during their first year.
- DHA intake in breast-feeding infants did not appear to improve cognitive or motor development.



Dr Shaun Holt:

The Inuit people who live in the Arctic obtain around 3/4 of their daily energy intake from fat. This is a very high proportion, making them a unique people to study. This very important study provides compelling evidence that if pregnant women take extra fish oil during their pregnancy (either in the diet or as a supplement), then this can help with the baby's development. Positive effects were seen in many aspects of childhood development, including visual acuity.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jpeds.2007.07.008>

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The effect of deep-tissue massage therapy on blood pressure and heart rate

The facts:

- Deep-tissue massage may have beneficial effects on high blood pressure, according to the results of a study in 263 healthy volunteers.
- Volunteers with a muscle spasm or strain received a deep-tissue massage for at least three-quarters of an hour while listening to soothing music.
- Diastolic blood pressure and heart rate fell significantly during the massage and these findings justify additional scientific research.

Dr Shaun Holt:

This study proves that a relaxing massage is just that – relaxing. The technique used in this study was deep-tissue massage, whereby specific joints and muscles are massaged gently at first, allowing firmer and deeper massage later if performed correctly. However the study had a flaw in that soothing music was played and it could be that the music was responsible for the improvements. Nevertheless, quite large reductions in blood pressure and heart rate were observed and the researchers rightly called for more research.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1089/acm.2007.0665>

Stress management versus lifestyle modification on systolic hypertension

The facts:

- Stress management controlled BP more effectively than lifestyle modification in a study of 122 patients aged ≥ 55 years with isolated systolic hypertension.
- Systolic BP fell significantly after 8 weeks in both groups, but the reduction was more evident in patients receiving relaxation training (stress management) than lifestyle modification.
- Patients in the relaxation group were 4 times more likely to be able to successfully stop taking an antihypertensive drug than patients in the lifestyle modification group.

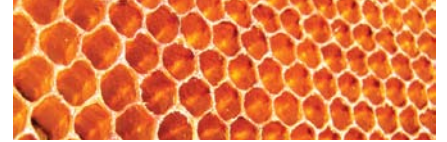


Dr Shaun Holt:

Do you know how stress is defined? It is when you perceive that the demands of a situation are greater than your resources. For example, a learner driver without much skill would find driving on a busy motorway stressful, but an experienced driver would not. Do you need expensive medications, often with side effects, to reduce your stress-related increases in blood pressure? This study found that both relaxation training and lifestyle modifications reduced blood pressure, often by enough to enable the person to no longer need their medications, with relaxation training having slightly better results.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1089/acm.2007.0623>

Cardioactive and vasoactive effects of natural wild honey



The facts:

- Ingestion of natural wild honey may protect the heart from the effects of stress, according to the results of an animal study.
- In anaesthetised rats, pretreatment with wild honey helped prevent cardiac and vasomotor responses to adrenaline-induced stress.
- Wild honey was also found to have relatively high antioxidant activity.

Dr Shaun Holt:

This is novel and exciting research. We know about the health benefits of honey in terms of wound healing, but this animal work suggests that it could also be good for your heart. Furthermore, the researchers may have determined the mechanism by which this occurs, namely, from the antioxidant effect of the honey. You may want to start taking that honey that you have in a jar at the back of the cupboard even if it has been there for years... honey can remain edible for many years and edible honey has even been found in pharaoh's tombs!

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1089/jmf.2006.172>



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

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Therapeutic effects of yoga for children



The facts:

- Yoga appears to have beneficial physiological effects in children undergoing rehabilitation, according to reports of the effects of yoga on quality of life and physiology in children.
- These findings need to be confirmed in larger trials, particularly those including specific measures of quality of life.
- If these findings are confirmed, there may be a role for yoga in the rehabilitation of children in clinical practice.

Dr Shaun Holt:

Yoga for children is gaining in popularity as a fun way of exercising and relaxing. This study was a systematic review – it assessed all the studies that have assessed yoga in children and the conclusion was that it appears that it does benefit children. It may be that an after-school yoga session would be more fun and healthier for children than playing on their Xbox!
<http://www.pedpt.com/pt/re/pedpt/abstract.00001577-200801910-00010.htm>

Regular Tai Chi Chuan exercise for Type 2 diabetes patients

The facts:

- Tai Chi Chuan exercise may improve immune function in patients with Type 2 diabetes mellitus, according to the results of a case-control study.
- A 12-week course of Tai Chi Chuan significantly improved T cell helper function (a measure of immunity) as well as markers of blood glucose control in 30 patients with Type 2 diabetes.
- Patients with Type 2 diabetes who are currently taking antihyperglycaemic drugs might therefore derive further benefit from regular Tai Chi Chuan exercise.

Dr Shaun Holt:

Tai Chi Chuan is a martial art, practiced by many people in China and thought to lead to better health and a longer life. In this study, health benefits for people with diabetes were assessed. The intervention appeared to reduce the most widely used measure of glucose levels over the long-term, HbA1c, and measures of immune function that are relevant to diabetes. Bigger studies are needed to verify the results and determine the mechanism of action.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bjbm.2007.043562>



Magnesium, calcium, potassium, and sodium intakes and risk of stroke in male smokers

The facts:

- A high magnesium intake may help reduce the risk of stroke in male smokers.
- A large group of male Finnish smokers (n = 26,556) had their dietary intake of magnesium, calcium, potassium and sodium measured via a questionnaire before being followed for over a decade.
- Those men with a higher magnesium intake had a lower likelihood of stroke during follow-up, but no associations were found for calcium, potassium and sodium.

Dr Shaun Holt:

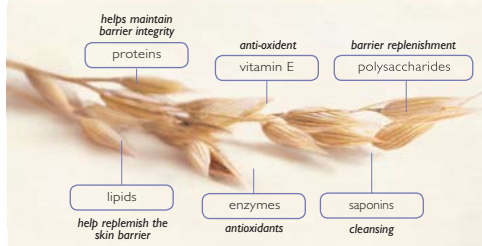
Non-medical people are often confused as to what is meant by the term “stroke” – it is damage to the brain caused by a blockage or leakage of the blood supply. If the effects last for less than 24 hours then it is called a TIA – a transient ischaemic attack. The findings from this large epidemiological study published in a high quality journal suggest that higher dietary intake of magnesium may prevent strokes. However, clinical trials of magnesium to prevent strokes are needed before a widespread recommendation can be made.

<http://archinte.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/abstract/168/5/459>

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The role of a probiotics mixture in the treatment of childhood constipation

The facts:

- A pilot study has shown that a mixture of probiotics containing bifidobacteria and lactobacilli (Ecologic®Relief) improves constipation symptoms in children.
- In the study, 20 constipated children aged 4-16 years received a daily mix of the probiotic mixture for 4 weeks.
- The frequency of bowel movements improved and the presence of abdominal pain was reduced in the children at study end.

Dr Shaun Holt:

Around 2% of the population suffer from constipation, and this proportion is higher in children. Increased dietary fibre and fluid intake are the first things to try to alleviate the symptoms. There is some evidence that probiotics may help constipation in adults, but what about in children? This small study showed that it may well work and it is worth trying if your child has a problem with constipation.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1186/1475-2891-6-17>

Probiotic food supplement reduces stress-induced gastrointestinal symptoms

The facts:

- Oral probiotics may reduce some of the gastric symptoms associated with chronic stress, according to a well-controlled study in volunteers.
- Three weeks' treatment with a probiotic containing *Lactobacillus acidophilus* and *Bifidobacterium longum* (Probio-Stick®) reduced stress-induced abdominal pain and nausea/vomiting in a group of otherwise healthy individuals with chronic stress.
- Treatment with the oral probiotic had no effects on any other physical, psychological or sleep problems associated with stressful lifestyle in this study

Dr Shaun Holt:

Chronic stress is an exacerbating factor in many medical problems, particularly those involving the bowel. Traumatic life events, responsibilities, exams, personal relationships... all can cause stress. Given the success of probiotics in treating many gastrointestinal disorders, a trial of the effectiveness of probiotics for treating stress-induced gastrointestinal symptoms was a logical study to undertake. It is therefore not surprising that the probiotic supplement did in fact help with these symptoms. There are few effective treatments for this common condition and I would envisage widespread use of probiotics.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.nutres.2007.10.001>

Treatment of deep sternal wound infection with honey

The facts:

- Local application of antibacterial honey (Medihoney®) appears to be useful in the treatment of deep sternal wound infection when combined with V.A.C.® therapy.
- In an observational study in 8 patients with this type of infection, all patients showed marked clinical improvement after an average 23 days' treatment (approximately 6 applications per patient).
- The results from a well-controlled trial assessing the effects of Medihoney® in patients with deep sternal wound infection are awaited with interest.

Dr Shaun Holt:

The success of honey in treating wounds has been one of the most important developments in natural health in the last few years. A particularly nasty infection can occur in the chest wall following cardiac surgery and better treatments are needed. This small study looked at a combination of honey and VAC therapy (also known as Topical Negative Pressure) and the results were impressive: all 8 patients had complete wound healing.

<http://www.thieme-connect.com/ejournals/abstract/thoracic/doi/10.1055/s-2008-1038073>

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