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Natural Health Review

Welcome to the latest issue of Natural Health Research Review.

Highlights include confirmation that probiotics should be used alongside rehydration therapy for acute infectious diarrhoea, and striking findings in favour of flavanoid-rich chocolate in patients with a failing heart. We also have evidence that multivitamin supplements can modestly reduce your chances of developing cancer; Echinacea extract can help prevent the common cold; and vitamin D may protect against Alzheimer's disease.

We hope you enjoy this issue of Natural Health Research Review, and welcome your feedback.

Kind Regards,

Shaun

Prof Shaun Holt

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Probiotics reduce diarrhoea severity and duration

The facts:

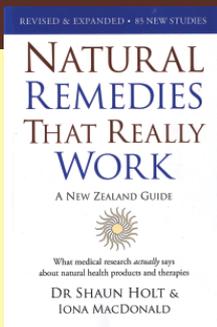
- A review of 63 studies involving over 8000 patients (mostly infants and children) with acute infectious diarrhoea found that probiotics reduced the duration of diarrhoea by about a day.
- Nearly all the studies reported a shortened duration of diarrhoea and reduced stool frequency in people who received probiotics compared with controls.
- Probiotics appear to be safe and have clear beneficial effects in patients with acute infectious diarrhoea when used alongside rehydration therapy, but more research is needed to identify exactly which probiotics should be used for which groups of people.



Prof Shaun Holt:

When you add up all the data from 63 good studies then you know you have the true answer, and this is what occurred in the Cochrane review of probiotics as a treatment for acute infectious diarrhoea. Anyone who has suffered from this knows that you just want it to be over as quickly as possible and the average reduction in the duration of the illness from taking probiotic supplements was just over 24 hours. The treatment was also found to be safe and is therefore strongly recommended in addition to rehydration.

<http://tinyurl.com/bcekb3w>



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Flavanol-rich chocolate has heart benefits

The facts:

- 20 patients with stable heart failure received either 2 bars of flavanol-rich chocolate or cocoa-free chocolate every day for 4 weeks.
- Both products were prepared by Nestlé and were wrapped identically; the flavanol-rich chocolate was a commercially available bar (Noir Intense™).
- Flavanol-rich (but not cocoa-free) chocolate improved markers of cardiovascular health within 2 hours of consumption, and some of the benefits were maintained for the duration of the study.



Prof Shaun Holt:

We have long known that foods containing flavanols confer health benefits, but the results from this small but well conducted study are still striking. Flavanol-rich chocolate improved vascular function in people with congestive heart failure and the effects were seen after eating the chocolate for only 4 weeks. In addition, the researchers found that the chocolate also caused an inhibition of platelet function i.e. it made the blood less sticky and the person less likely to have a blood clot that could cause, for example, a heart attack.

<http://eurheartj.oxfordjournals.org/content/33/17/2172.abstract>

Multivitamins may reduce risk of cancer in men

The facts:

- Over 14,000 male US doctors aged 50 years or older took a multivitamin tablet (Centrum Silver™) or a placebo daily for over a decade to see if the multivitamin had any effects on cancer risk.
- For every 1,000 men per year in the study, there were 17 cancers among multivitamin users and more than 18 among those taking the placebo (amounting to an 8% lower risk of developing cancer in the vitamin group).
- Multivitamins made no difference in the risk of developing prostate cancer, which accounted for half of all cases.

Prof Shaun Holt:

I have no idea if I am deficient in any vitamins or minerals, and so have been taking a multivitamin for years as a form of insurance policy. And I'm not the only one as around one-third of adults and as many as half of those over 50 take multivitamins. This enormous study suggests that they can modestly reduce the chances of developing cancer ... there was an 8% reduction. This is less than the reduction from exercising and having a good diet, but it all helps.

<http://jama.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=1380451>

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Multivitamin-multimineral supplements do not increase risk of death

The facts:

- This study pooled data from 21 trials of multivitamins and multiminerals (involving nearly 100,000 adults) to see if the supplements were associated with an increased risk of death.
- Only studies that lasted for at least one year were included and studies with people with terminal illnesses were excluded.
- No link between multivitamin-multimineral supplements and all-cause mortality was identified.

Prof Shaun Holt:

There have been fears about the safety of multivitamins and antioxidants since a widely publicised 2007 meta-analysis reported that antioxidant supplements were linked to a 16% increase in mortality risk. Many people, including myself, were highly critical of this study as it was fundamentally flawed for many reasons, not least, because over 400 clinical trials were excluded from the analysis because no deaths were reported. This new meta-analysis from Australia conclusively found that a daily multivitamin does not increase the risk of death, and actually found a trend for a reduced risk of mortality, although this did not reach statistical significance.

<http://ajcn.nutrition.org/content/97/2/437.short>

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Echinacea for common cold prevention



The facts:

- 673 healthy individuals took liquid echinacea extract (Echinaforce®) or placebo 3 times daily for 4 months to assess the protective effects of echinacea against the common cold.
- People in the echinacea group reported fewer colds (149 vs 188), fewer cold recurrences, and needed less aspirin, paracetamol and ibuprofen than those taking placebo.
- Analysis of 201 nasal swabs that were collected during the study found fewer viral infections in the echinacea group than in the placebo group (54 vs 74).

Prof Shaun Holt:

This is the largest echinacea clinical trial ever published, and the researchers enrolled nearly 700 people in a randomised, double-blind trial. Those who took the echinacea extract reported fewer colds (149 versus 188), decreased recurrence of symptoms, fewer viral infections, and relied less on the use of over-the-counter medications to relieve their symptoms than those in the placebo group. If you do not want to take it every day, there is also evidence that taking it when a cold starts will reduce the duration and severity. However, it is not recommended for people with asthma as some severe reactions to it have been reported.

<http://tinyurl.com/bema545>

Vitamin D and Alzheimer's disease in women

The facts:

- Almost 500 elderly women were assessed for dietary vitamin D intake at baseline before being followed for 7 years to see if they developed dementia or Alzheimer's disease.
- Women who developed Alzheimer's disease were found to have a lower vitamin D intake at the start of the study than those who didn't develop any type of dementia (mean intake 50.3 vs 59.0 micrograms per week).
- Women with the highest dietary intake of vitamin D had the lowest risk of developing Alzheimer's disease.

Prof Shaun Holt:

There is no cure for Alzheimer's disease, which is becoming more common as people live for longer. This study found that women who developed Alzheimer's disease had lower vitamin D intakes than those who did not develop the illness - women who developed Alzheimer's had an average vitamin D intake of 50.3 micrograms a week, whereas those who didn't develop dementia at all averaged 59 micrograms. This is just an association, not definitive proof, but adds to the ever-expanding number of reasons why most people would probably benefit from taking a vitamin D supplement.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/gerona/gls107>

Determinants of vitamin D status in young children

The facts:

- This study measured vitamin D levels in almost 2000 healthy young children (aged under 6), and asked their parents to fill in a questionnaire regarding the child's vitamin D intake and various lifestyle factors.
- Researchers found that the two factors most strongly associated with higher vitamin D stores in these children were taking a daily vitamin D supplement and drinking 2 cups of cow's milk a day.
- Both of these factors were better predictors of a child's vitamin D stores than skin colour or measures of exposure to the sun.



Prof Shaun Holt:

Skin colour and exposure to the sun are important in determining how much vitamin D is in a child's body, but this new research has found that taking a vitamin D supplement and drinking cow's milk are the two most important factors. Vitamin D deficiency is a risk factor for a number of illnesses, including asthma and allergies in children and severe deficiency can cause rickets, a softening of bones. Study leader Dr Maguire said: "Early childhood is a critical stage in human development, so achieving and maintaining optimal vitamin D levels in early childhood may be important to health outcomes in later childhood and adulthood".

<http://archpedi.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=1556963>

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New avocado/soybean product slows hip osteoarthritis



The facts:

- 399 patients with symptomatic hip osteoarthritis and a minimum joint space width (JSW) of the target hip between 1 and 4mm took avocado-soybean unsaponifiable-Expanscience (ASU-E) 300 mg/day or placebo for 3 years.
- The main measure of hip osteoarthritis (JSW loss) did not differ between groups after 3 years, but there were 20% fewer 'progressors' in the ASU-E group.
- Treatment with ASU-E reduced the speed of JSW narrowing and therefore has potential in the treatment of patients with hip osteoarthritis.

Prof Shaun Holt:

This study was on a product that I was not previously familiar with, but I suspect that we will be hearing a lot more about it. The product is avocado-soybean unsaponifiable-Expanscience (ASU-E) and the study looked at whether it could slow radiographic progression in symptomatic hip osteoarthritis. It was a large, very well conducted study and the authors concluded that 3 years' treatment with ASU-E reduced the speed of joint space width narrowing, indicating a potential structure modifying effect in hip osteoarthritis. Remember where you heard about this product first!

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23345601>



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

Fish oils make children smarter

The facts:

- This review of randomised controlled trials found that supplementing children's diets with fish oils is one of several effective ways to raise their IQ levels.
- Enrolling children in a quality preschool, and engaging them in interactive reading also improves their intelligence measures.
- The researchers found little evidence for a beneficial effect on IQ measures from other forms of nutritional supplements, including iron, thiamine, ascorbic acid, and B-complex vitamins.

Prof Shaun Holt:

Although I'm a huge advocate of taking fish oil supplements, and I think that most people would benefit, there have been some poorly undertaken studies that have clouded the picture as to whether these supplements can make children more intelligent. This study adds weight to the case that they do, as it was a meta-analysis that found that supplementation with omega-3 rich fish oil is one of several effective methods to help boost children's intelligence measures. The New York University research team found that other effective measures were enrolling children in a quality preschool and engaging them in interactive reading.

<http://pps.sagepub.com/content/8/1/25.abstract>

Calcium and vitamin D supplementation: health benefits

The facts:

- Almost 40,000 postmenopausal women in the US took 1,000mg calcium and 400IU of vitamin D3 daily, or placebo, for an average of seven years.
- In women in the active treatment group who weren't taking calcium or vitamin D supplements at the start of the study, the risk of hip fracture occurring during the study was 38% lower than that in the placebo group.
- The researchers found no link between vitamin D and calcium supplementation and cardiovascular outcomes.

Prof Shaun Holt:

We all know about the benefits of calcium and vitamin D for postmenopausal women in terms of preventing osteoporosis, but the issue has been clouded recently with concerns of an increased risk of heart disease from taking calcium supplements. This study found that long-term use of calcium and vitamin D confers a reduction that may be substantial in the risk of hip fracture among postmenopausal women, as we would expect. But importantly there was no link observed between vitamin D and calcium supplementation and cardiovascular outcomes. Also, there was a suggestion of a lower risk of breast cancer and total cancer among supplement users.

<http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00198-012-2224-2>

