

# Herbal and Natural Care of the Heart and Circulation: Part 2

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*"One Love, One Heart, Let's get together and feel all right"; Bob Marley*

Last month, in part one of this article I discussed heart health and how we can prevent most heart and circulatory disease through practices of right body, mind and spirit.

Right body practices include eating a proper diet, exercising regularly, maintaining your ideal body weight and avoiding harmful habits such as smoking. Equally important are right mind practices, such as good stress management and relaxation techniques, as well as learning to express yourself truthfully, by "speaking from the heart". Right spirit qualities important for heart health center on the ability to create a loving nature by loving one's self and others. Our internal flow moves smoothly and in balance when we are in harmony with Gaia's greater flow, of which we are part.

Unfortunately, many of us have already developed heart disease through years of bad habits or benign neglect. Others suffer from heart disease because of genetic tendencies (a scientific expression of the concept of karma) or other uncontrollable factors. This article will discuss natural ways to treat, reverse and prevent disability and death from the common forms of heart and circulatory disease.

It's crucial to keep your arteries clear of cholesterol plaques so that blood can flow freely to your heart, brain and body. Much attention is being focused on blood cholesterol levels, but this is only one part of the full picture. For example, in some traditional cultures people eat a diet high in cholesterol and saturated fats, but still have little heart disease.

This is because cholesterol is inert until it becomes oxidized by free radicals in your bloodstream. Your blood's level of free radicals is a dynamic balance between your intake and production of these harmful substances minus those your body detoxifies and eliminates. Free radicals are increased when we consume certain artificial food additives, pesticides and junk foods or are exposed to environmental toxins. These burden your liver and can inhibit it from doing its work of cleansing your blood.

When oxidized cholesterol contacts the arteries' smooth inner lining atherosclerotic plaques begin to form. As these develop, the arteries narrow, reducing blood flow. Atherosclerosis can also be caused by genetic defects in fat metabolism. In those living a typical Western lifestyle plaque formation begins in childhood and is almost universal by middle age.

Plaques that form in the crucial coronary arteries that provide the heart with its blood supply

cause coronary artery disease, the major cause of angina and heart attacks. When plaques develop in the brain's blood vessels, they lead to cerebrovascular disease and strokes. Plaques constricting the arteries supplying the body can cause disabling peripheral vascular disease and claudication.

Wherever they form, atherosclerotic plaques cause blood vessels to become narrow and stiff, stressing your heart by forcing it to pump harder against increased resistance. High blood pressure can also lead to strokes, vision loss and kidney failure.

The combination of atherosclerosis and high blood pressure is especially dangerous. The elevated pressure can cause the heart to grow to a pathologic size, increasing its demand for oxygen. Your body can compensate for this imbalance for a long time without any symptoms. But, as the disease progresses, the narrowed arteries may be unable to keep up with the heart's demand for oxygen, greatly increasing the risk of heart attacks and sudden cardiac death.

Treatment for most heart disease should start with diet. A proper diet will help stop formation of new arterial plaques, help your body's natural healing power dissolve existing plaques, and increase blood circulation by strengthening the heart and relaxing constricted blood. A healthy diet is also vital for nourishing the heart muscle, arteries and the nervous and hormonal systems that control circulation. It's equally important to properly care for and nourish your liver as well as your kidneys, which helps control blood pressure and eliminates toxins from your body.

Try to eat six to ten servings a day of whole grains, and another eight or more servings of a variety of fruits and vegetables and other high fiber foods such as beans and seeds. Water soluble fiber, found in brown rice, beans, barley and most fruits is especially beneficial. Make a habit of eating dark leafy green vegetables, high in the antioxidant vitamin E, whole oats, which are excellent general nutritive tonics and soy products which contain lecithin, an emulsifier that helps break up fat deposits. Fresh carrot juice and apples help flush harmful cholesterol from the blood to the bile, where it is eliminated.

It's best to emphasize vegetarian protein sources. If you do eat animal products, cold water "oily" fish such as salmon and herring are best. Drink lots of fluids, especially pure water and relaxing herbal teas, as this helps the kidneys do its job of eliminating toxins from the body.

Minimize your intake of fatty foods, except for cold pressed olive oil and raw nuts and avocados. Avoid foods high in cholesterol, such as red meat, eggs and milk fats. The "trans" fatty acids found in margarine and other partly hydrogenated oils may be even more harmful than cholesterol and other natural saturated fats. Many prepared foods contain a variety of artificial food additives that can be stressful to your liver. Others release free radicals that oxidize cholesterol into its harmful form, triggering plaque formation.

Avoid smoking and all forms of nicotine, as this heart and nerve poison causes contraction of blood vessels, accelerates heart rate and raises blood pressure. Caffeine raises cholesterol levels as well as blood pressure and heart rate, so it's best to avoid frequent use of this herbal

stimulant drug.

Choose organic foods when possible, as these are unlikely to contain the harmful chemical residues of industrial agriculture. Organic foods grown on vital, living soil often contain higher levels of trace minerals important for optimal heart function.

It's wise to supplement your diet with free-radical neutralizing antioxidants, such as Vitamins C and E, selenium, Green tea and Grape Seed extract. If you are at high risk for developing heart disease natural anti-clotting herbs such as Feverfew (*Tanacetum parthenium*), Garlic, Evening Primrose and Borage oils and concentrated fish oils such as Max-EPA can reduce your risk. Other especially helpful herbs include Ginkgo (*Ginkgo biloba*), Cayenne, Chickweed, Lime Blossom and Hawthorne.

When **angina** is present, or if you have a personal history of heart attack Meadowsweet, Willow Bark and Motherwort may be useful. These are often best combined with prescription heart medications under supervision of a knowledgeable practitioner. Cholesterol lowering drugs can be lifesaving for folks with resistant disease. It's best to use these only as a last resort because of their toxic effects on liver function. They should be used in combination with liver protective herbs such as Milk Thistle and Burdock root.

Heart disease can often be reversed without invasive heart surgery or angioplasty. In fact, these procedures are usually only temporarily helpful unless underlying bad habits are changed. For example, Alfalfa (*Medicago sativa*) lowers cholesterol and can actually reverse plaque buildup. Lymphatic and liver tonics such as Echinacea, Cleavers, Burdock, Dandelion and Red Clover will often be helpful. Sometimes an elimination diet and cleansing fast will facilitate healing.

As I described in last month's article, it's vital to learn to manage stress, and cultivate a loving nature. Cultivate love for yourself and others, and your connection to the Mother Earth and the divine.

**High blood pressure**, also called 'hypertension' affects about 1 in 5 Americans. It's more common in the elderly and in African Americans. It's called the "silent killer", as symptoms usually don't occur until damage is done.

Hypertension is especially related to chronic anxiety, excess sodium in the diet and elevated cholesterol. It can be triggered by food allergies, which can cause spastic contractions of the arterial muscles. Use of a variety of prescription, over the counter and herbal medications, such as oral contraceptives, decongestants, steroids Ephedra (*Ephedra sinensis*) and Licorice root (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*) can cause reversible hypertension. Excessive consumption of stimulants such as caffeine and the amino acids tyrosine, found in fermented foods and phenylalanine (found in Nutrasweet TM) can worsen hypertension. It can also be a secondary symptom of hidden medical illnesses, such as adrenal and other hormonal imbalances, kidney disease and diseases of the heart muscle, valves or hardening of the arteries.

Treatment should be directed at correcting underlying causes, such as improper diet, sedentary lifestyle, drugs that elevate BP, chronic stress and excess alcohol use. If these measures fail, the next step is specific therapies that lower BP. These initially should include meditation and relaxation techniques and specific nutritional interventions.

For example, a diet high in whole grains, nuts, cold water fish, and fresh fruits and veggies. Also, supplementation with Calcium and Magnesium, antioxidants such as Vitamin E and C, lecithin, essential fatty acids as in flax seed and olive oil and apples, which are high in pectin. Use herbal salt substitutes to season food. Lots of water to flush toxins from the body.

The next step is specific herbal remedies that are tailored to the individual's specific circumstances. An example would be garlic (fresh or capsules 3 times a day), which relaxes blood vessels and helps clear out plaques, Rosemary, Cayenne and Ginger, which are general circulatory tonics, Hawthorne, which is a specific heart tonic (also Motherwort and Lily of the Valley), Chamomile and Skullcap, which are relaxing nervines and are especially helpful when nervous tension is a problem and Dandelion, which is a diuretic, used if there is excess fluid retention. Ginkgo may be used to relax narrowed coronary arteries, as it inhibits platelet activating factors.

Lymphatic cleansers, such as Cleavers and Echinacea (This is an example only, will be different for each person)

If this step fails, or if HTN is severe, it will be necessary to use more potent (and risky) prescription drugs to control blood pressure. These can readily be combined with natural therapies.

**Congestive heart failure** occurs when the heart muscle is unable to pump forward all the blood that returns to it. Fluid starts building up in the venous system, causing edema of the feet and ankles. As the disease progresses, fatigue, trouble breathing when recumbent and finally pulmonary edema result. Congestive heart failure is more common in the elderly and results from clogged hardened arteries or after damage from a heart attack.

This often deadly problem should be professionally evaluated.

Treatment is directed at correcting the underlying cause (diet, smoking, weight, sodium). Natural diuretics help the kidneys rid the of excess fluid include dandelion root (high in potassium), Broom, Cornsilk and parsley. Hawthorne, a heart tonic, Lily of the Valley, and ginger may be helpful. Black cohosh (not when pregnant) and Broom are circulatory tonics. Foxglove leaf may be used under supervision. Trace mineral supplements such as kelp, Nettles, Alfalfa and Red Clover and the amino acid L-carnitine help strengthen the heart muscle.

Signs of **poor peripheral circulation** include cold fingers and toes, varicose veins and leg cramps with exertion (called claudication). It's important to treat underlying causes, especially CHF as described above.

Wear loose fitting clothing that don't impede circulation, stay active, loose weight and avoid sitting or standing for long periods (like in a car or airplane). Absolutely avoid nicotine in any form. Biofeedback and meditation Ginkgo, Gotu Kola (not with angina) Ginger and Cayenne help increase circulation. Hawthorne, Vitamins C and E, and the bioflavonoids Quercetin and Bromelain help strengthen blood vessels. Topical compresses of Comfrey, Horse Chestnut, Castor Oil, Arnica and Cayenne extract may also help. Massage with caution may help.

**Palpitations**, the feeling of a fluttering or racing heart can be a simple manifestation of anxiety or nervous tension, reaction to overuse of stimulants, most often caffeine, or a warning sign of serious structural heart disease or hormonal or electrolyte imbalances. If related to nerves, treating the cause of nervous tension will be helpful. Herbs that reduce cardiac irritability include Hawthorne (reduces cardiac irritability), Black Cohosh, OATS, Motherwort, (relaxes smooth muscle) Valerian, Passion Flower and Lemon Balm.

This overview is presented for educational purposes only. For advice regarding specific health conditions consult a qualified health care professional.

This article originally appeared in ***Sentient Times***.

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