

Herbal and Natural Heart and Circulatory Health:

Part 1

by Howard Woodwind Morningstar, MD

"He that is merry of heart has a continual feast" (Proverbs)

Your heart is a muscular pump the size of your fist that beats about 100,000 times a day, every second of your life. Its four chambers and valves and vast network of muscular arteries open and close rhythmically, moving energy in the form of oxygenated blood and materials from wherever they are to wherever they are needed in your body.

The arteries branch and branch into ever smaller vessels, finally ending in microscopic capillaries, barely the width of a single blood cell. These communicate in the body's tissues with veins and lymphatic vessels that return carbon dioxide and waste materials to the heart. A ring of "coronary" arteries supply the heart itself with vital oxygen. A separate system of pulmonary arteries and veins circulates blood through the lungs, collecting oxygen in the red blood cells' hemoglobin while excreting carbon dioxide and other toxic waste products to the outside air.

Perhaps the most amazing component of the circulatory system is the blood itself, the vehicle for nourishing, energizing, protecting and cleansing every cell in your body.

Your heart and circulatory systems are controlled by the combined influences of multiple nerve and hormonal signals. The incoming balance of these electrical and chemical messages determine your heart's rate and strength of contraction, your blood pressure, and the tone of arterial muscles as they properly direct blood flow to your body's organs. For example, anger and fear stimulate the heart's contractions and raise blood pressure through the action of the hormone adrenaline and the associated "sympathetic" nervous system. On the other hand, calm, loving and peaceful emotions trigger the relaxation response of endorphins and the "parasympathetic" nervous system, slowing your heart rate and lowering blood pressure.

When your heart functions normally, it beats while you live unaware of the miracle of its intricate function. Unfortunately, heart and circulatory disease has become an epidemic in Western civilization, affecting one out of four Americans. It causes heart attacks, congestive heart failure and strokes, and is by far the most common cause of death in our society.

Most people with heart or circulatory disease have early warning symptoms. These may be subtle or dramatic, and can include fatigue or trouble breathing with normal physical exertion, edema (swelling of the feet and legs), heart palpitations, fainting, visual disturbances or angina (chest pain or tightness with exertion or stress). However, many people with atherosclerosis (plaques that constrict blood flow) and high blood pressure have no symptoms until the problem is far advanced. High blood pressure is called "the silent killer", because it can remain hidden until a devastating heart attack or stroke occurs.

The good news is that we can prevent most heart and circulatory disease with proper diet, lifestyle and spiritual practices. In fact, in many cultures that have kept their traditional lifestyle, heart disease is extremely rare even among the elderly. When these societies begin to adopt harmful Western habits they too are plagued by this epidemic.

The key to maintaining a healthy heart and circulatory system throughout life is proper attention to their physical, emotional and spiritual needs. On the physical plane it's important to nourish your heart muscle and blood and to take proper care of the nervous and hormonal systems that control and balance circulation. It's equally crucial to keep your arteries and heart valves open and free of blockages.

A good place to start is a healthy diet with lots of **high fiber foods**, including a variety of whole grains, fruits and vegetables. Emphasize vegetarian protein sources, such as nuts and beans. In addition, "oily" cold water fish like salmon and herring, soy products, whole oats, garlic, onions and apples all are especially good for your heart and circulation.

It's best to choose **organic products** whenever possible. Organic foods are grown on vital soil that contain a variety of trace nutrients needed for optimal enzyme function in your heart and throughout your body. Also, organics are unlikely to contain chemical residues that can stress your liver and distract it from its work of purifying your blood.

Next, minimize your intake of **high fat foods**, especially those containing animal or saturated fats. High cholesterol foods, such as red meat and eggs should be used minimally, if at all. Partly hydrogenated oils, found in margarine and many commercially prepared foods are particularly harmful. All these can contribute to the formation of the artery-blocking plaques of atherosclerosis responsible for so many heart attacks and strokes. If you add fat to your food, choose monounsaturated oils, such as cold pressed olive oil.

Avoid highly **refined carbohydrates**, such as "enriched flour", as these are deficient in fiber, essential oils and trace minerals. Excess intake of refined sugars like sucrose and corn syrup can cause harmful fluctuations in your blood sugar and insulin levels, while frequent use of salty, high sodium foods can raise your blood pressure.

Excessive use of **caffeine**, other stimulant drugs and **alcohol** can also be harmful. On the other hand, recent research suggests that drinking one glass of red wine a day may reduce your risk of heart disease.

Use of **nicotine** in any form is especially toxic to the heart and circulation. Smoking a single cigarette increases heart rate and blood pressure while constricting circulation for hours, so it's crucial to avoid habitual use of tobacco products. Tobacco abuse continues to be responsible for more preventable deaths than any other cause in our society, more than accidents, murder, AIDS and war combined.

Besides eating a proper diet, it's important to maintain your ideal body weight. Obese individuals are particularly at risk for high blood pressure and heart disease, as well as diabetes and other serious medical problems.

Aerobic exercise increases blood flow to your heart, tonifying and strengthening this muscle and its crucial coronary arteries. Ideally, you should find an enjoyable outdoor aerobic activity and exercise vigorously for 20 minutes, at least three times a week. If you are over 35 consult your health care practitioner before starting a new exercise program.

We all know that our hearts' health is deeply intertwined with our emotions. For example, to "speak from the heart" means to express your true feelings. When we fail to express anger effectively the heart is subjected to high levels of stress hormones such as adrenaline. With time this can initiate and accelerate a variety of deadly illnesses, including high blood pressure, strokes and coronary artery disease. Individuals with chronic suppressed anger and poor stress management skills are more likely to suffer from, become disabled and die prematurely from these diseases.

It's important to reduce sources of anger and stress in your life when possible. Learn to manage these effectively by expressing yourself constructively. These powerful emotions can also be great teachers, catalyzing personal growth and healing if their messages are heeded. It may be difficult to make needed changes, which could involve a new career or relationship changes.

However, the first step in healing is to end your exposure to what is harming you.

Become adept at one or more stress management technique, such as meditation, prayer and ritual, yoga, and breathing exercises. Aerobic exercise, music, loving touch and therapeutic massage can be very helpful. Avoid excessive exposure to noise and other upsetting forms of mental pollution. Laughter is strong heart medicine, and let's not forget the great Dr. Suss, who taught that "Fun is good".

"Follow your heart" means find your own truth. A constricted spiritual life leads to constricted circulation, so it's vital to open your heart and find harmony with Gaia's greater whole. When you connect with and love nature you create a loving nature in yourself. Start by opening your heart to yourself, and you will find what you really need to be whole. See the world around you with an open heart, and you will be cared for lovingly.

At the highest and deepest levels, that which you hold in your heart is the key to finding joy in life. Next month's article in *Sentient Times* will continue this topic with a discussion on herbal and nutritional remedies for preventing and treating specific heart and circulatory problems, including high blood pressure, atherosclerosis and heart attacks, congestive heart failure, strokes and poor circulation.

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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