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Welcome to naturalhealthreview.org Issue 11.

In this issue we have even more research on the benefits of fish oils, this time on the effects in the elderly and in heart failure. Also featured are a couple of studies about treatment of chronic pain as well as two regarding the associations of some essential vitamins in the prevention of diabetes.

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

Dr Shaun Holt

shaun@naturalhealthreview.org

Fish oils have beneficial effects on mortality in the elderly

The facts:

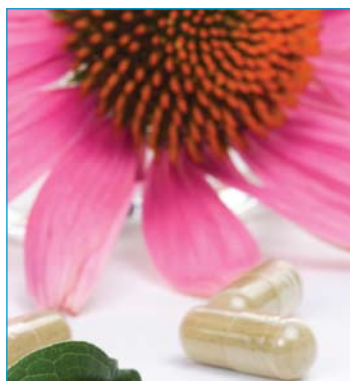
- Elderly people who eat a lot of fish oils may live longer than those who don't, according to the results of a Norwegian study.
- 254 frail elderly patients who were admitted to hospital with an acute illness had plasma EPA levels measured to determine their dietary intake of fish oils, and were then followed for 3 years.
- Patients with the highest plasma EPA levels at the start of the study were significantly less likely to die during follow-up than patients with the lowest EPA levels.



Dr Shaun Holt:

As I've said many times, an association is not necessarily proof of a causal relationship. However, in this study, the higher the blood levels of EPA (which would roughly correlate to how much fish oil had been in the person's diet), the more likely the elderly people were to be alive. We know that omega-3 fatty acids help prevent heart disease and it could be that this study simply reflects that, but more likely it could be that the omega-3 fatty acids are helping to reduce the impact of many diseases.

<http://www.ajcn.org/cgi/content/abstract/88/3/722>



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Two 'heart-smart' diets: Mediterranean and Low-Fat



The facts:

- Switching to a low-fat or Mediterranean-style diet after a heart attack led to a better outcome than continuing with usual diet in this study of 202 heart attack patients.
- Over a 3- to 4-year period, patients who switched to one of the 'heart-smart' diets were much less likely to have a cardiac event than those who continued with their usual diet.
- Both diets were low in saturated fat and cholesterol, but the Mediterranean-style diet had a greater intake of omega-3 fatty acids.

Dr Shaun Holt:

A Mediterranean-style diet is based on the diet in Crete, Greece and the South of Italy, consisting of lots of plant foods and fruit, not much red meat, fish, poultry or dairy products, olive oil as the main source of fat and moderate amounts of alcohol. Although this diet does have quite a lot of fat, it is in the form of olive oil and so is low in saturated fat. This study showed that both a Mediterranean-style diet and a typical low fat diet reduced the chance of heart disease and deaths, as opposed to not adopting either of these diets.

[http://www.ajconline.org/article/S0002-9149\(08\)00236-1/abstract](http://www.ajconline.org/article/S0002-9149(08)00236-1/abstract)



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

Low EPA levels predict dementia risk

The facts:

- The association between plasma EPA levels and dementia risk was investigated in a cohort of 1214 older people over a 4-year period.
- Patients with higher EPA levels at baseline were found to be less likely to develop dementia over time than patients with lower EPA levels.
- Patients with higher ratios of omega-6 to omega-3 fatty acids seemed to be at higher risk for dementia, particular if they also had depression.

Dr Shaun Holt:

We know that omega-3 fish oil is helpful in the treatment of depression, but can it prevent dementia? Dementia is a decline in mental functioning due to diseases which affect the brain or due to simply growing old. Areas of brain functioning that are affected are memory, problem solving, concentration and language skills. When the process is well established, the person can become disorientated in time, place and person ie. they are not sure what day it is, where they are or even who they are. This study found that higher plasma EPA levels reduced the risk of dementia, and more studies are urgently needed to see if taking omega-3 fish oil can therefore prevent dementia or stop the decline if it is already present.

<http://www.ajcn.org/cgi/content/abstract/88/3/714>

CAM use by primary care patients with chronic pain

The facts:

- A US survey of 463 patients suffering from chronic pain found that complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) use was popular but not preferred over traditional pain therapies.
- Just over half the patients surveyed were using CAM for relief of chronic pain, but only 14% of these patients achieved complete pain relief with CAM.
- When asked to choose between CAM and traditional therapies for pain relief, most patients still preferred traditional therapies.



Dr Shaun Holt:

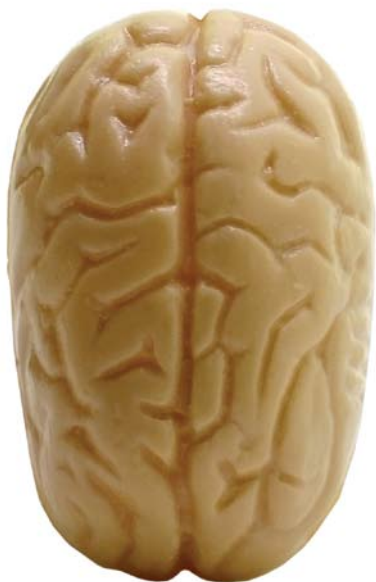
I used to work in a chronic pain clinic and so know at first hand how difficult chronic pain can be to treat. My boss used to say that after a clinic he did not know whether to shoot himself...or the patients (he was only joking!). Therefore, it is not surprising given the lack of success of mainstream medicine that patients with chronic pain often try alternative medicines. This large survey found that half of such patients used alternative medicines and half of those that used them said that they helped. My only comment is that I was surprised that more patients had not tried alternative medicines.

<http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/journal/119879634/abstract>

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Vitamin B12 may protect against brain shrinkage



The facts:

- Low plasma levels of vitamin B12 may be associated with brain shrinkage and subsequent cognitive impairment in the elderly, according to the results of this study.
- 107 elderly volunteers without cognitive impairment at the start of the study had their plasma vitamin B12 levels measured at baseline before being assessed annually by clinical examinations, MRI scans and cognitive tests.
- People with low plasma vitamin B12 levels at baseline were found to have the most brain shrinkage over the 5-year follow-up period.

Dr Shaun Holt:

B12 is one of the 8 B vitamins and is needed in every cell of the body. It has been long known to have a role in the normal functioning of the brain and this study found that older people with lower levels of Vitamin B12 had larger decreases in brain volume over the 5-year period of this study, which would likely lead to problems of cognition including poor memory. The question now is: does taking more Vitamin B12 stop this shrinkage and help prevent these problems and this study needs to be done. Vitamin B12 is found in meat, milk and eggs and so vegans may struggle to get enough in their diet.

<http://www.neurology.org/cgi/content/abstract/71/11/826>

Fruit and vegetables reduce the risk of developing diabetes



The facts:

- This study investigated the association between plasma vitamin C levels and the risk of developing type 2 diabetes.
- 21,831 healthy men and women filled out a food frequency questionnaire and had plasma vitamin C levels measured before being followed for 12 years.
- People with the highest plasma vitamin C levels at the start of the study had a greatly reduced risk of developing type 2 diabetes; this highlights the importance of a diet rich in fruit and vegetables for diabetes prevention.

Dr Shaun Holt:

The strength of the findings from this study lie in the dose-response relationship that was found: the higher the vitamin C level and the fruit and vegetable intake, the lower the chances of developing diabetes. There are many other reasons for eating lots of fruit and vegetables of course, and the reduced risk of diabetes is yet another. It is worth bearing in mind in terms of food preparation that Vitamin C is not destroyed by boiling at 100 degrees centigrade, but pressure cooking, frying, roasting or grilling can lead to temperatures that are high enough to reduce the vitamin C levels in foods.

<http://archinte.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/short/168/14/1493>

Alexander technique lessons, exercise and massage (ATEAM) for chronic back pain

The facts:

- Lessons in the Alexander technique from registered teachers had long term benefits for patients with chronic or recurrent lower back pain in this study.
- 579 patients were randomised to receive normal care, massage therapy, or Alexander technique lessons (6 or 24), with or without an exercise prescription, and were followed for 1 year.
- Exercise and Alexander technique lessons (but not massage) effectively reduced pain levels for up to 1 year; 6 lessons plus exercise was almost as effective as 24 lessons alone.

Dr Shaun Holt:

The Alexander Technique teaches the self-perception of movement and poise and is claimed to be able to alleviate pain and weakness due to poor posture and to help with rehabilitation after injuries or operations. This was a large study conducted in over 60 General Practices in England. The study showed that one to one lessons from a registered teacher of the techniques had long term benefits for patients with chronic back pain, and that only 6 lessons led to most of the benefits obtained from having 24 lessons.

http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/abstract/337/aug19_2/a884



Yoga eases menopause symptoms

The facts:

- The effects of yoga on menopausal symptoms were investigated in 120 peri-menopausal women at 14 Swami Vivekananda Yoga centres in India.
- The women were randomised to a yoga group (breathing exercises, sun salutation and cyclic meditation) or to a control group (simple physical exercises under supervision) for 1 hour/day, 5 days/week for 8 weeks.
- Women in the yoga group (but not controls) reported significant improvements in menopausal symptoms such as hot flushes, night sweats and sleep disturbance, as well as cognitive function.



Dr Shaun Holt:

The menopause is when the female reproductive system ceases to function and this usually occurs between the ages of 45 and 55. Due to large changes in hormone levels, there can be a number of unpleasant effects in some women, including mood swings, hot flashes, insomnia and even depression. This excellent study showed that, when compared to a control intervention of simple physical exercises, the group who practiced yoga for 8 weeks had significantly fewer symptoms. On the basis of these results, I would certainly recommend that women who are experiencing menopausal symptoms give yoga a try.

<http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/journal/119878264/abstract>

Fish oils in heart failure study

The facts:

- A well-controlled trial in patients with chronic heart failure has shown that treatment with omega-3 fatty acids has small benefits in terms of mortality and hospital admissions for cardiac problems.
- Almost 7000 heart failure patients were randomised to receive 1g omega-3 fatty acids or placebo daily for several years.
- Use of fish oils reduced both the risk of death and the risk of admission to hospital for cardiovascular reasons by almost 10% compared with placebo.



Dr Shaun Holt:

This is another huge study proving beyond any doubt the benefits of taking 1 gram a day of omega-3 fish oil. The patients in this study had moderate or severe heart failure, as demonstrated by the fact that nearly one third of the patients on the study had died after 4 years. Although the decrease in deaths and hospital admissions was not huge, the benefits are still worth having, especially as omega-3 fish oil is easy to take, inexpensive and has a multitude of other benefits. Also, the improvements seen were actually better than those obtained from taking a convention drug called a statin.

<http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140673608612398/abstract?isEOP=true>

Vitamin K may improve insulin resistance

The facts:

- This study investigated the effects of vitamin K supplements on insulin resistance in healthy people aged between 60 and 80 years.
- 355 men and women were given a 500mcg dose of vitamin K daily for 3 years; their levels of insulin resistance were then measured and compared with pre-treatment levels and with those in untreated individuals.
- Vitamin K supplementation for 3 years at a dose attainable in the diet was found to reduce the progression of insulin resistance in older men but not women.

Dr Shaun Holt:

Vitamin K gets its name as it is involved in the blood coagulation process (Koagulation in German). This study looked at whether it was beneficial in patients with insulin resistance – this is a condition where the body does not react as it should to insulin that is produced by the pancreas, and so often leads to diabetes. The interesting finding from this study was that 3 years of treatment did in fact reduce the progression of insulin resistance, but intriguingly, only in men. The dose taken was not high and could be obtained from a well-balanced diet or as part of a multivitamin.

<http://care.diabetesjournals.org/cgi/content/abstract/dc08-1204v1>



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