

# At the Heart of it



Health Matters

By Kerry Sauser

In just a couple of weeks valentine hearts will be the center of attention everywhere. You know, Cupid is on target by making the heart of primary importance. In health, as in love, the heart is vital to our very existence. No other part of our body works as hard or as ceaselessly as our heart and the circulatory system attached to it.

The heart connects to literally thousands of miles of blood vessels that transport nutrients and other essential materials in the blood to our cells. The same system then carries waste products back from the cells to the organs for elimination. It sounds simple, but it's a demanding job. The heart pumps 2000 gallons of blood through 65,000 miles of blood vessels by beating 100,000 times each day! With that in mind, it should be no surprise that the heart consumes more energy than any other part of our body, and that we must keep it strong for good health.

Statistics show that many of us need to pay better attention to our heart health. More than 40 percent of all deaths in the US are from heart and cardiovascular disease (CVD). That means more people die from CVD than from cancer, diabetes, AIDS and accidents combined. Luckily, we have a lot of control over our heart health. In fact, low cost lifestyle choices such as eating a heart healthy diet, exercising, avoiding tobacco and making nutritional adjustments have some of the most positive results.

Because our heart controls how well every other part of our body works, we need to keep it fueled and maintained with plenty of energy and nutrition. We can also maximize its efforts by keeping the blood vessels clear and properly dilated.

The comparison to plumbing is obvious. You don't get much flow if you have clogged or improperly sized pipes (blood vessels) and a broken pump (the heart)! All components must be in good working order for the overall system to function well.

Obstructed blood vessels (clogged pipes) have garnered a lot of attention in recent years as cholesterol and inflammation concerns. Rightly so. The standard American diet is loaded with trans fats, processed sugars and preservatives—additives that cause our body to produce substances in the blood such as cholesterol and triglycerides. The body may respond to these substances in a number of ways, such as depositing excess cholesterol in blood vessels or by causing inflammation. Such actions constrict vessels and reduce blood flow throughout the body, most critically to the heart muscle itself. It's a dangerous situation, and when veins and arteries serving the heart are affected, heart attack chances increase dramatically.

I must clarify though, that having some cholesterol is vital to good health. Cholesterol helps us digest fats, strengthens cell membranes, insulates nerves and produces hormones. Not enough can result in fat being depleted from vital organs—with disastrous results. (This sort of condition in the brain causes Alzheimer's-like symptoms.) So, it's not as much about your quantity of cholesterol, as it is about how your body uses it. This is why the relationships between HDL, LDL and triglycerides are evaluated in cholesterol tests.

Statin drugs (i.e. Lipitor, Zocor, Crestor) have been used to reduce high cholesterol levels, but are prescribed less routinely now due to negative side effects that include liver and muscle damage. Interestingly, there are also natural dietary supplements that can help lower cholesterol and support the heart and circulatory system without negative side effects.

One such supplement, Coenzyme Q10, has proven to be a critical factor in maintaining the strength and vitality of the heart. It is a natural, fat-soluble nutrient found in all living cells and is a vi-

tal component in energy production in the body. Because our body's pump has such high energy requirements, CoQ10 is particularly relevant to heart health. Though our body does produce some CoQ10, aging, stress and certain medications (including statin drugs) significantly reduce it. Studies show that supplementing with CoQ10 can reduce hypertension and heart disease, and can help repair the heart muscle after heart attacks. It is also very effective in protecting the lining of arteries from free radical damage—a contributor to hardening of the arteries.

The B vitamins support strong muscle function in the heart and throughout the body. B6 and B12 Vitamins nourish the heart, blood vessels and the nerves that operate them. Niacin (B3) lowers total cholesterol and triglycerides, and Panthethine (B5) can actually block cholesterol production. Folic Acid (B9) and Choline may help maintain appropriate dilation of the blood vessels, and B4 helps correct irregular heart-beat. The B vitamins work best in tandem, so I recommend using a whole food B-complex to assure that nutrients are supplied in the proper proportions and their most effective form.

Vitamins C and E and Fish Oil supplements can benefit the heart and cardiovascular system as well. Whole food Vitamin C (do not confuse with ascorbic acid) helps the heart convert nutrients to energy. It also reduces arterial stiffness that restricts blood flow to the heart. Vitamin E is an antioxidant that protects from deposits in the arteries and helps improve heart endurance. The omega-3 fatty acids EPA and DHA, found in fish oil, can lower blood pressure and triglycerides, reduce inflammation and maintain a healthy heart rhythm. A study conducted on post-menopausal women taking fish oil showed a 27 percent reduction in the risk

for heart attack.

Certain herbs have long been used for heart support. Garlic is probably one of the best known due to its ability to maintain a healthy blood flow through the circulatory system. By reducing cholesterol and blood pressure levels, it optimizes the blood vessel condition and makes the heart's action more efficient. Garlic is a powerful free radical fighter that helps prevent damage to blood vessels.

As I said before, our lifestyle has the most powerful effect on our heart. It has been proven that we can largely prevent cardiovascular disease by our choices alone. In addition to the physical choices of good nutrition, exercise, weight management and avoidance of tobacco and excess alcohol, be sure to include positive emotional and intellectual choices. Learn to manage stress, anger and worry. These emotions literally go straight to the heart and have a negative physical impact on your health. Finding a way to work through these feelings will help improve your heart health.

Finally, make the intellectual choice to take care of your heart. If you give your heart a little love and care... it will work for a lifetime without missing a beat!

Until next month... Heal well, be well...naturally!

**(Dr. Kerry Sauser, ARNP, ND, PhD, practices functional health care at the Natural Health Center in Atlantic. Her offices are located in the Complementary Care Center at the corner of 2nd and Linn Street. The CCC is open to the public and hosts a natural food store, and health care services including, massage, Ortho-Bionomy, digital thermography, reflexology, hypnosis, and acupuncture.)**