

Nutrition & Herbalism: Tools for a Preventive Lifestyle

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There's a great deal of interest in "prevention" lately. People are starting to clue into the fact that it's easier to guard against illness and disease than it is to repair and heal once poor health has set in. Study after study suggests that consuming the right foods and using nutritional and herbal supplements to fortify our health is the way to keep from having to undergo medical treatments of every kind. This paper will explore the basics of how to use nutrition and herbal preparations as part of a healthy, preventive lifestyle.

NUTRITION & NUTRITIONAL SUPPLEMENTS

Having an accurate understanding of nutrition is vital to living a healthy lifestyle. Many people consume foods that are causing their bodies harm, all the while thinking that they are receiving good nutrition. Unfortunately, our culture has warped what "good nutrition" is; fast and processed foods abound claiming to give a body what it needs to be strong and healthy and to prevent disease. So often, this is exactly opposite of the truth.

So, what is nutrition, exactly? A formal definition, as put forth by The Council on Food and Nutrition of the American Medical Association is "*The science of food, the nutrients and the substances therein, their action, interaction and balance in relation to health and disease, and the process by which the organism ingests, digests, absorbs, transports, utilizes, and excretes food substances.*" This can be distilled to mean that nutrition is the science of how the body uses food. Nutrition is life, because all living things require food and water to live. To live *well*, however, *good* food and *good* water are necessary. The truth of the matter is this: failure to eat and drink nutritious food and beverages can lead to many diseases.

To understand nutrition, we also need to understand the concepts of energy and nutrients. *Energy* is what it takes for a person to do anything: think, speak, or act. Just about every bite of food gives energy, whether it provides nutrients or not. *Nutrients* are actually chemical substances that the body utilizes to build, maintain and repair cells, tissues, etc.

There are basically two kinds of nutrients: *macronutrients* (protein, fat, carbohydrates, and water) and *micronutrients* (vitamins, minerals, etc.). In general, people need many more grams of the macronutrients than the micronutrients. For example, the average man needs about 63 grams of protein a day, but the same amount of vitamin D could be very, very bad. Some nutrients are called *essential*. This has a specific meaning in nutrition terminology. There are roughly two things that make an "essential nutrient" essential:

1. An essential nutrient cannot be made in the body. (It has to be ingested.)

2. An essential nutrient is linked to a specific disease caused by its deficiency. (For example, deficiency in vitamin D causes Rickets and Osteomalacia.)

The essential nutrients include many well-known vitamins, minerals, amino acids and at least two fatty acids. While a full discussion of these nutrients is important, it is beyond the scope of this paper.

Another group of interesting compounds found in food are *phytochemicals*, and these have been getting a lot of press lately. These are chemicals people get from plants. Some of them are well known (such as vitamins and beta-carotene, which the body turns into vitamin A). Other phytochemicals are less well known, but no less beneficial to the body. Scientists are still discovering today different phytochemicals and how helpful they are and can be when used in a preventive manner. Any study of prevention through nutrition and lifestyle will touch on phytochemicals as they are some of the best, most natural and side-effect-free ways to protect against diseases like cancer, heart disease and diabetes (some of the top “killers” in the U.S. today).

Some of the most popular and powerful phytochemicals in wide-spread use today include:

- **Quercetin:** found in fruits and vegetables such as apples, onions, berries, citrus fruits, and cruciferous vegetables, this helps prevent cancer, heart disease, inflammation and respiratory diseases.
- **Resveritrol:** found in grapes, red wines, berries, tomatoes and other red, purple and dark fruits and berries, this antifungal agent protects against cancer and cardiovascular disease.
- **Anthocyanins:** found in fruits, vegetables, flowers and plants whose colors range from red to blue, these are powerful anti-oxidants which boost the immune system, fight infections and help ward off cancer.

All these benefits – and more – are readily available to people who enjoy a healthful diet. These are beneficial compounds that occur naturally in foods and have enough therapeutic action to keep people from having to rely on prescriptions medications. Yet so often, people overlook how powerful food can be.

Two other terms to know when thinking of nutrition as part of a healthy, preventive lifestyle are synergy and anti-nutrients. When two or more things work together to accomplish something greater than the sum of their parts, *synergy* is at play. In nutrition, synergy is vital, as some nutrients simply require other nutrients to do any good at all. For example, without adequate vitamin D, the body cannot make use of calcium. What this means is that taking single vitamins and minerals is not nearly as effective as taking a broad spectrum multivitamin/mineral supplement, which in turn is not nearly as effective as eating a wide variety of *whole foods* (unprocessed, natural foods, usually organically raised). Whole foods are the purest, most nutrient-rich substances available for human consumption. Some good examples of whole foods include: whole grains, beans, legumes, vegetables and fruits. All of these things should be in their original state to be considered whole foods.

Just as there are whole foods, which are great sources of nutrient-rich fuel for the body, so too are their substances known as *anti-nutrients*, which (as the name suggests), stop nutrients from

being used by the body or even promote their excretion. Most people can identify anti-nutrients, because they are the things that we already know aren't all that good for us. Some examples of anti-nutrients include: pesticides, antibiotics, hormones, preservatives, chemicals, smoking, alcohol, caffeine, heavy metals, hydrogenated oils...the list is pretty long, actually.

The key to a lifestyle of prevention through nutrition is to consume a large amount of foods that are truly wholesome and nutritious (i.e., whole foods) and a small amount (if any) of the less-than-healthy foods so readily and widely available today. This way, good food habits are built and reinforced along with good health, while leaving enough flexibility in the diet that a person does not feel deprived of some of what they may consider the "joys of life." The goal, after all, is health, and although physical health is a large part of the equation, the mind and spirit are part, as well.

All this said, it's very difficult to consume enough of the organic, whole foods that we need to provide us with optimal amounts of nutrients. The sad fact is that our soil is depleted and the foods that used to pack a powerful, healthful punch may no longer do so. To this end, taking nutritional supplements can help make up the difference. Anyone living a preventive lifestyle will want to incorporate at least a few nutritional supplements and a qualified Holistic Health Practitioner should be able to help a person figure out which supplements would be of the most benefit.

I suggest that people stay away from tablets (hard pills) as often as possible, and go for supplements that are liquid (gel caps, for examples) or in caplets (clear celluloid caps). This is because tablets sometimes are hard enough that unless the digestive system is in top shape, they may go through the body undigested or incompletely digested. Gelcaps and liquid supplements, obviously, are much easier for the body to absorb. And I like caplets because once the celluloid container dissolves (which will happen even in water in about 30 minutes), the contents are easily dispersed into the stomach (or intestines, as the case may be).

Here's a very short list of supplements that I recommend to most my clients:

- **Broad spectrum multivitamin/mineral supplement:** This is a good way to make sure that a person gets *at least* the RDA of all the essential vitamins and minerals. In some cases, optimal amounts of nutrients can be obtained this way, as well. The multivitamin/mineral supplement I use also includes a host of other things such as health-building herbs and digestive enzymes.
- **Vitamin C:** Probably the best-known vitamin in the United States, this is a powerful vitamin and one that I think everyone should take more of. It's water-soluble, so the body excretes whatever amounts it doesn't use. Taking 1,000-10,000 mg (and sometimes more) throughout the day can be extremely beneficial to a person's health, as it boosts the immune system, fights heart disease, reduces the risk of many different kinds of cancer, and helps keep many functions of the body strong.
- **Omega-3 Fatty Acids:** This is a supplement that is gaining fame, because researchers are uncovering how important omega-3s are for a healthy heart and mind. High enough doses (up to 3 grams a day) can actually eliminate stress, anxiety, depression and a host of mood disorders, and the essential fatty acid is very good for the skin, hair and nails, as well as for weight loss and heart health.

HERBS & HERBAL PREPARATIONS

It's shocking to consider that although we have more hospitals, doctors, surgeries and medications available to us than at any other time in history, we also have the highest rates of sickness, ill health, side-effects and disease. The statistics are readily and widely available and as a result, there is a shifting tide in the general populace: people are looking for alternatives. Herbal medicine, also known as Herbalism or Herbology, has been employed successfully in various cultures around the globe for centuries as a means of treating common ailments and diseases. Knowing why and how to use herbal preparations is an important step in living a healthy, preventive lifestyle.

When most people think of herbal remedies, they probably think of powdered herbs sold in capsules at the local health food store. This is certainly part of the herbalist's cache of tools. Many herbs, when dried correctly, become even more potent medicinally than they are in their live and natural state. Grinding such herbs so as to fit well into caplets is an excellent way to prepare and administer the healing power of herbs. There are other methods of delivery, however, which can be of equal benefit. Some these include:

- **Teas, infusions and decoctions.** These are also viable ways to make use of herbs. Depending on the herb and the part of it that is used (i.e., flower, leaves, root, bark, etc.), an herbalist will need to allow the herb to steep for an appropriate time frame. Adding boiling water to herbs and allowing them to steep releases the herbs' therapeutic compounds, making the resulting liquid highly useful in preventing ill health and strengthening an already ailing body.
- **Tinctures.** These are liquid solutions made by soaking herbs (usually in alcohol) to draw out their therapeutic components. Tinctures are typically very strong and are diluted by adding a measured amount to water and then sipping slowly and throughout the day.
- **Ointments and lotions.** These are a convenient way to apply herbs to the skin. Ointments contain natural fats dissolved in oil; they sit on the skin and are excellent for first aid. Lotions can be creamy or liquid and typically soak into the skin, delivering an herb's therapeutic components to the tissues and bloodstream.
- **Compresses.** Applying hot or cold compresses (made by soaking a clean cloth in an infusion, tea, or decoction) to the body has long been known to help treat sprains, bruises, headaches, muscular aches and other pains.
- **Poultices.** Similar to a compress, a poultice is applied directly to the body, but rather than a liquid extract, the whole herb is used. These are particularly good for drawing impurities out from the body.
- **Herbal Steams.** These are ideal for bronchial and respiratory conditions. Herbs are crushed or chopped to break cell walls and release vital compounds and then boiling water is poured over them in a bowl. A person leans over the bowl with a towel draped over his or her head and (with eyes closed), breathes deeply. This method carries the essential oils of herbs directly into the person's lungs and airways.

These are among a wide variety of ways that herbs can be used medicinally. Other methods of preparation are easily located via the internet or several good book reference resources.

Just as important as how an herb's medicinal compounds are delivered to the body is which herb is used in the first place. There are herbs available for every condition and ailment. Many of these work well together synergistically, and some are quite potent just on their own. A well-trained Master Herbalist will know which herbs: strengthen and tonify the body (adaptogens), stimulate sexual desire and potency (aphrodisiacs), stimulate and promote menstruation (emmenagogues), calm and soothe the nerves (nervines), help the body expel mucus (expectorants), and promote the functioning and movement of the bowels (laxatives). These are just a sample of the many different actions that herbal remedies can have upon the body.

It's very important to know which herbs to use in times of ill health and injury. However, it is also helpful to know which herbs are particularly well-suited for following a preventive lifestyle. Unlike pharmaceutical drugs which are taken only when there is a problem, many herbs can be taken as tonics and used primarily (like vitamin and nutritional supplements) to maintain good health. Some herbs can be used over the long-term, providing many health benefits that prevent disease and promote a strong immune system. Some of these include:

- **Turmeric:** a spice common in curry powders. It contains a compound called *curcumin*, which research has proven has powerful antioxidant and cancer-preventing properties. It's also an anti-inflammatory.
- **Rose Hips:** the "fruit" of the dog rose and other wild roses. These can be mashed into a vitamin-rich pulp and consumed raw or cooked. They provide immune-boosting vitamin C.
- **Flax:** the seeds and pressed oil are both used medicinally. Flaxseeds provide digestive fiber and the oil contains large amounts of disease-preventing essential fatty acids.
- **Feverfew:** a common plant whose flowers, stems and leaves are used medicinally to prevent migraine headaches.
- **Sorrel:** a tart, refreshing green leafy herb. Sorrel strengthens immunity, cleanses the bloodstream and helps fight infections.
- **Rosemary:** a very pungent herb used often in cooking, it is high in naturally-occurring antioxidants, strengthens the circulatory system and combats fatigue and bloating.
- **Dandelion:** a common "weed." This herb is also an excellent liver, gallbladder and kidney supporting herb.

Though herbs are "natural," they need to be treated with respect. "Natural" does not necessarily mean "harmless" and this is one of the things that a Master Herbalist must teach her clients. Whenever suggesting an herbal remedy, it is important to check for drug-herb-vitamin interactions. This is one way that a Master Herbalist can be of great benefit to those who are seeking a preventive lifestyle and want to make use of the herbal products that are so widely available today.

CONCLUSION

A preventive lifestyle is necessary in today's toxic world. Without a healthy lifestyle, nutritious plant-based diet, and wellness-promoting herbs and supplements, people today are simply born into impending sickness. The body is an amazing thing and "wants" to be healthy. It has

regenerative and self-detoxification abilities, but it requires the right “fuel” to allow these systems to function well. In a world where we breathe, ingest, and otherwise expose ourselves to countless known (and unknown) toxins, we must take at least some steps to provide our bodies with this “fuel.” And this means that anyone interested in a life of health and wellbeing needs to practice prevention and a healthy lifestyle. As a Master Herbalist, it will be both my duty and my pleasure to share this information with my clients.

Resources

Natural Medicines by Andrea Peirce, ©1999.

Earl Mindell's New Herb Bible by Earl Mindell, ©2000.

The Complete Guide to Natural Healing, International Masters Publishers, Inc. ©2000.

The One Earth Herbal Sourcebook by Alan Keith Tillotson, ©2001.

Making Herbal Remedies, Global College of Natural Medicine, ©2002.

The New Optimum Nutrition Bible by Patrick Holford, ©2004.

Enhancing Your Mind/Body/Spirit, International Masters Publishers, Inc. ©2005.