



February 2008 Health Letter

Heart Health Month

February is the month which we Americans dedicate to the promotion of heart health. With the appearance of heart shaped Valentines everywhere, how could we forget? As I think about heart health, I believe that the integrative medicine model which we have set up at Aiken-Augusta Holistic Health is perfectly poised to fill a national need for well rounded preventive services. The set of recommendations which I provide for patients after an integrative medicine consult covers at least seven domains of health: conventional medicine, nutrition, botanical medicine and supplements, mind-body medicine, physical activity and bodywork, energy medicine, and spirituality and relationships. Let me take a moment to cover heart healthy preventive recommendations in each of those areas.

- Conventional medicine: know your lipid values. National preventive services guidelines suggest that all adults have lipid screening once every five years. I agree. Know your blood pressure. Elevated fasting lipids and elevated blood pressure are both strong predictors of cardiovascular disease, and these need to be monitored and kept in the normal range. Sometimes conventional prescription medications are appropriate, but often more natural approaches also work well, and I will sketch a few of those here. And of course, don't smoke.
- Nutrition: so much to say, so little space. Eat 5 to 9 servings of vegetables and fruits daily. Eat more whole grains such as oats and brown rice. Enjoy healthy oils every day, specifically extra-virgin olive oil (great for dipping whole-grain bread), and fish oils either as cold-water fish (Alaskan salmon or sardines for example) or as capsules. Ground flax seeds and walnuts are another good way to get your healthy omega-3 oils. Eat less meat and enjoy vegetable sources of protein on a regular basis, such as beans (legumes) and soy. Strictly avoid trans fats by staying away from margarine, deep-fried foods at restaurants, and any foods baked with hydrogenated oils (read food labels and don't trust the front of the package, only the ingredients list).
- Botanical medicine and supplements: Eat more garlic. Garlic has a long history of use in botanical medicine for heart health. It can help to normalize blood pressure and lipids. It also makes the blood less likely to clot. Decreased clotting is generally good for heart health, but you do need to stop any garlic or garlic supplements one week before surgery. A daily dose of psyllium fiber can help to lower LDL cholesterol. An antioxidant called Coenzyme Q-10 has a specific benefit for heart muscle, and should be taken especially by persons taking statin medications for high cholesterol.
- Mind-body medicine: research has demonstrated that a daily meditation or relaxation practice such as mindful breathing can help to normalize blood pressure. In our current high stress fast paced world, I recommend a few moments of mindful breathing, meditation, or a daily yoga or Qigong (chee-gung) practice for everyone. The benefits of this extend far beyond heart health alone.
- Physical activity and bodywork: stay physically active throughout your life, pursuing enjoyable exercise routines that are appropriate for your age. So while I am no longer participating in the competitive sports which I enjoyed in my twenties, I do enjoy moderate exercise on a regular basis. Make time for a 30 minute walk daily as a minimum. Adding some high intensity exercise to that is also recommended. Besides helping to get rid of soreness after exercise, a massage is also a wonderful way to relax and de-stress the heart. Give a gift of a professional massage to the exerciser in your life for Valentine's Day!
- Energy healing: while current biomedical science would see it differently, I believe that human beings are more than chemistry and body parts. We do not fully understand yet the impact of the body's subtle electromagnetic field on health. But even if research fails to unravel these mysteries, my personal and professional experience tells me that addressing body energies can have profound impacts. Acupuncture is one way of moving and balancing body energy. A modern blending of ancient Ayurvedic traditions and nursing theory is the practice of Healing Touch, which I find very powerful.

- Spirituality and relationships: What gives you meaning and purpose? Who are you? Who is important to you? How are you doing with forgiveness? These are all heart issues on more levels than just the physical. Find a way to experience love and gratitude every day, and remember the Hebrew scripture, “A cheerful heart is good medicine.”

So take a broader look at heart health this February, and as we do here, think “holistic.”

For health and healing,

Robert Pendergrast, M.D.

Announcements about February events here at AAHH: A Qigong class is ongoing, and we are taking registrations for another session to begin soon. We have appointments open for your individual health concerns; please call the office at 803-426-1421 to schedule a visit. And remember to get your weekly cancer prevention tip by going to www.realfoodsthatheal.com.

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