**Radically Reversing Arthritis through Natural Therapies**

**By Gary Null, Ph.D.**

When addressing any disease, it is crucial for us to focus our attention on repairing the causes of the disease, rather than just the symptoms, otherwise the disease will remain. While treating the symptoms may cause their cessation, it is only temporary. They will return so long as the underlying factors are not addressed.

**Entering the System**

When it comes to most diseases, including arthritis, there are essentially two ways of entering treatment – through conventional or natural medicine. While it is possible to combine these approaches, the priorities and methods associated with the treatment protocols of each vary greatly. I encourage as many people as possible to enter the system through a naturopathic or acupuncture physician, especially if prevention is your key concern Natural treatments address the underlying imbalances that cause tissue degeneration with potential of prevention and reversal. When you enter the system from the natural side, you have a much better chance of handling your illness thoroughly and permanently while creating improved health in the long run. Perhaps the most valuable thing to keep in mind on your journey with arthritis is the importance of embracing natural methodologies *as soon as possible*. If you wait too long, you run the risk of not being able to reverse the disease to a point where you regain enough functionality to enjoy life. The power is yours, as is the ability, and you will be pleasantly surprised with the results.

**The Route of Conventional Treatment**

People who begin to experience stiffness or discomfort in their knees and hips, or a loss of range of motion, commonly see a physician for advice. In many cases, x-rays are taken to evaluate joint degeneration, and signs of a problem are usually found. This typically leads to a rapid surge of treatments even prior to the real cause of the problem being identified. Daniel Nuchovich, M.D. says, “Many doctors rush in with colorful pills and recommendations for surgery before the *cause* is actually determined; this practice is a disservice to anyone with arthritis.”

The issue with using x-rays or MRIs to diagnose arthritis is that studies show a very poor correlation between radiographic evidence of joint changes and loss of function. Pain specialist Dr. Dillard shared with me that the vast majority of his patients who exhibit arthritis on radiographic images are actually pain-free. The research demonstrates that many people with degenerative joint disease on x-rays do not suffer from any disability, and likewise many who complain of problems have normal radiographs, but this is rarely explained to the patient. Instead radiographic “proof” of joint disease usually leads to immediate prescriptions for anti-inflammatory drugs, and recommendations for possible surgical intervention depending on the level of pain. The dreaded pronouncement of “bone on bone,” of course, sends you right to the surgery suite. One prescription medication is generally not the end, others are soon added. Some medications may agree with you while others may not, and there is typically a trial and error process. Worse is that you may be on other medications for another disease. In this event, the introduction of an additional pharmaceutical creates a new biochemical dynamic that could result in the need of yet another drug to address the side effects of the initial one.

Meanwhile, unless steps are being taken to institute dietary and exercise therapy, the tissues continue to degenerate, and the arthritis advances. The conventional route is a frightening and dangerous prospect that leads to an almost certain demise, including becoming and arthritis patient for life. We know that it doesn’t have to be this way; living a healthy, balanced life and making natural health protocols a priority go a long way in preventing and eradicating arthritis.

**The Route of Natural Treatment**

Natural therapies have existed for many thousands of years – far longer than our modern medical technologies. In today’s medical community, you will hear these therapies called “complementary,” for the reason that they serve as a complement to modern applications. This points to an incorrect belief that modern Western medicine is the “best” and “most important” form of medicine, and should be the primary form for the diseases that ail us. This couldn’t be farther from the truth. In fact, eating natural foods, utilizing natural therapies and living as naturally as possible, free from toxic influences, are the *only* ways to actually “cure” the lifestyle diseases that plague most Americans at this time.

Natural therapies such as acupuncture, massage and dietary therapy are customs and techniques deeply rooted in ancient history and should be recognized by *everyone* in our society as essential for a healthy, long, pain-free life. With this recognition, these therapies can assume their rightful place in out currently ailing healthcare system.

The terms “integrative health” and “integrative therapies” are two that I would suggest are more appropriate for evolving a healthcare system with true power and integrity – one that recognizes the obvious limitations of modern medicine but recognizes and advocates the tremendous value of natural medicine. A system like this would promote a healthier society overall and would also be sustainable for *humanity*, rather than just self-interested corporations and systems. We are talking about the lives of human beings here, and until we collectively see how far we have strayed from nature, and how much it is harming us, we will not change our situation.

Speaking of which, when embarking upon an arthritis treatment program through a natural practitioner such as a Naturopathic physician, a Doctor of Acupuncture, a Doctor of Osteopathy or Chiropractor there is one thing that is consistently the same. Nearly all of these practitioners begin their analysis and eventual treatment of your illness with a comprehensive health and nutritional profile, including appropriate testing. All of these medical professionals are interested in treating the whole person, not just one area of the body. The training for these professions is deeply rooted in the foundational concept that a person’s illness cannot be separate from the person itself, and that illness almost always results from mental, emotional, spiritual and physical disease. Dr. Yeshe Donden, world-renowned Doctor of Tibetan Medicine and former physician to His Holiness the Dalai Lama has said, “Health is the proper relationship between microcosm, which is man, and the macrocosm, which is the universe. Disease is a disruption of this relationship.” Indeed, this is the belief held by natural medicine practitioners.

“We need to think about our spirit in the treatment of arthritis and pain. When we are doing the things we love, following our passion, and our lives are relatively balanced and not too stressful, we are creating a healthy environment for our body. When we are not following the path that we believe we should, it causes a lot of internal stress,” said Chinese Medicine Doctor of Acupuncture Peter Bongiorno, N.D., L.Ac. “In Chinese Medicine, the heart spirit affects all the other organ systems and stops things from working properly, and this can create issues later on that we are pre-disposed to, like arthritis.”

Bongiorno continued, “I always ask people if they are doing the things that they love, if their relationships are healthy, and if not, what steps can be taken to change those situations. I believe – and have seen from my experience – that the body tells us when our spirit isn’t in alignment with how we are living; and when we take steps to do what makes our heart happy, our body responds.”

This is a far different intake approach than on the allopathic side, which is mainly concerned with previous illnesses, surgeries and current medications. Can you see the difference already? A survey of doctors by Consumer Reports (Reported in Newsweek Magazine) said that 70 percent of doctors reported that the bond with their patients has eroded since they began practicing medicine. (cite) At the heart of the problem, says doctors, is the managed-care revolution of the 1980s and 1990s, which resulted in lower reimbursements to doctors, making it necessary for them to slash the amount of time spent with their patients in order to see more patients per day (and make the same amount of money). Findings have estimated that on average, patients can expect outspend no more than 10 to 16 minutes with their doctor, with an average around 7 minutes!

In contrast, most naturopathic physicians spend anywhere from one to two hours (6-12 times the amount of time spent with an allopathic physician) on the initial visit, and one-half hour each on return visits. The longer visits are not only related to more in-depth questioning on the doctor’s part but include educating a patient about the causes of disease and wellness.

What can be learned and determined about a person and their disease in 7-15 minutes? Wouldn’t you feel more comfortable with a health professional that is schooled to look for and assess the causes of dis-ease, and then address them in the treatment program?

Natural doctors will typically develop a protocol after the initial visit. They will discuss the protocol and suggest actions that you can take to improve your condition at a follow-up visit. One of the first things that many naturopaths will do in addressing arthritis is to make certain that your vitamin and mineral levels are strong and balanced. Low levels of nutrients are a factor in inflammation and, therefore, arthritic conditions, so they must be dealt with as a first course of action. If you aren’t already on a multivitamin and multi-mineral supplement, chances are this will be recommended, along with other key supplements like omega-3s, glucosamine/chondroitin and key antioxidants.

In general, natural practitioners are oriented toward restoring your wellness, which means stopping the progression of arthritis – and even reversing it.

Our current arthritis treatment paradigm is locked into a model that creates patients for life out of people suffering from arthritis symptoms. It relies exclusively on a variety of expensive, toxic medications to ease pain and temporarily retard tissue destruction and even more expensive joint replacement surgery when patients believe there is nothing more that can be done. Arthritis is big business. NSAIDS are some of the top-selling products for the pharmaceutical companies, and the industry relies heavily on arthritis sufferers for a steady income stream.

The popular nutraceuticals glucosamine and chondroitin have finally been accepted by mainstream healthcare providers and are commonly recommended as an adjunct to help maintain cartilage. There is a growing body of new evidence that a radical diet change along with exercise can actually provide a superior alternative to unnecessary, harmful drugs. Because joint destruction appears to be caused primarily by inflammation and oxidative stress, antioxidants and foods that lower arachiondic acid can be the key to turning off – or more to the point – preventing the inflammatory cascade. This goes a long way in bone health and maintaining cartilage so that arthritis doesn’t develop or progress.

Studies funded by industry continue to conclude that foods make no difference in alleviating the symptoms of any type of arthritis. In actuality, quite the opposite has proven to be true. In the few independent studies that have examined the subject, diet has been shown to be of the utmost importance in causing, halting and reversing arthritis. Symptoms of arthritis can be alleviated and often reversed by adopting a vegetarian or vegan diet high in anti-inflammatory and anti-oxidant rich foods.

In the case of **gout**, it is critical to avoid high-purine foods, especially meats, fish, caffeine, sugar and alcohol, in order to halt the inflammatory process.

In **rheumatoid arthritis**, it is likewise crucial to avoid animal proteins and processed foods, known for inciting the damaging immune process that causes the body to destroy its own healthy tissue.

There has been anecdotal evidence over the years that avoiding meat, dairy, eggs and processed foods can bring enormous relief to rheumatoid arthritis sufferers. Dr. Colin Dong successfully cured his own arthritis by adopting what he referred to as a Chinese peasant diet. He wrote two books about the benefits of eating rice, vegetables, nuts , seeds and a little fish, while forbidding meat, dairy, soft drinks, alcohol and all additvivesand chemicals.

Research shows that certain oils, fish and fresh vegetables were commonly associated with improvements while red meat, white flour and soft drinks aggravated symptoms. A number of recent studies show that adopting a low-fat vegan diet can immediately reduce symptoms of pain, swelling and limited range of motion.

One group of researchers from Norway did a controlled study in a supervised setting whereby a group of rheumatoid arthritis sufferes began the program with a 7-to-10-day fast. After the fast, half the group was assigned to a vegetarian diet, and the other half resumed their normal diet. They found significant improvement in the vegetarian group, and especially in the participants who chose to continue the diet beyond the study.

Joel Fuhrman M.D. – a leading proponent of the vegetarian diet – monitored over 500 fasts in a variety of clinical conditions, followed by a vegan diet. He reported in *Alternative Therapies* journal that fasting can offer both reduction in pain and lower inflammatory markers in patients with autoimmune illnesses, including rheumatoid arthritis. He also found that if the fasting period is extended long enough, a substantial number of patients actually experience total remission of autoimmune symptoms that do not return in about half of the cases.

John McDougall, M.D. has had notable success in treating sufferers of rheumatoid arthritis with the McDougall diet, a vegan diet based in unprocessed plant foods and whole grains.

The conclusion of T. Colin Campbell, Ph.D.’s *China Study* is that the people who ate a diet low in animal proteins were the healthiest and lived the longest lives. Correspondingly, in 2002, there was a comparative study done between elderly in China – where the prevailing diet consists mostly of fruits and vegetables, rice and other grains and fish – and the U.S. for hip osteoarthritis. The conclusion of the study was that the Chinese experienced hip osteoarthritis 80-90 percent less frequently than Caucasians in the United States.

To maintain joints, it is necessary to avoid the Standard American Diet. Joint function is maximized with a diet high in antioxidants and omega-3 fatty acids, low in omega-6 fatty acids and rich in nutrients supplied by greens, grains, legumes, fruit and other who plant foods. Likewise, it is crucial to avoid inflammatory foods such as meat, dairy, eggs, high fructose corn syrup, unhealthy fats, white flour, and processed foods.