

Natural Therapies for the Weak Heart

By Stuart H Freeddenfeld, MD

My father, like my grandfather, suffered his first heart attack at age 55. He was a good patient and followed all doctor's orders. Although he rejected alternative treatments he had excellent conventional medical care. Nonetheless his disease progressed and fifteen years ago, at age 74, my father was diagnosed with late stage heart disease. Already on maximal standard therapy, he was told that nothing more could be done and was relegated to life on constant oxygen support with a tube just long enough to get him to his bedside commode.

Continuing on standard medical care, he continued to decline week to week. His prognosis was very poor so when I next visited him at his Florida home, it was with the intention of saying our goodbyes. With a "what the heck" attitude I asked him one more time to let me help him, and with a similar attitude, he agreed. That very day, I started him on a variety of supplements to begin strengthening his heart.

By the end of the first week, he was able to walk around the house without his oxygen tank. By week two, he was walking back and forth to the swimming pool at the end of the street. At the end of week three, I watched with tears of joy as he slipped off his sandals, stepped into the pool, and carefully swam to the other side. We gradually added more treatments and over the next five years he was able to resume playing golf, traveled the world, and even walked the Great Wall of China. All this time he remained in the care of local cardiologists who routinely told him that, although they did not understand his supplements, they felt it was okay to continue them. Then one day he changed cardiologists. This new "super specialist" insisted that he stop taking all supplements and my father complied... He rapidly deteriorated and even though we eventually resumed the treatments he was never able to recover strength and died soon after.

Do not misunderstand, doctors who reject alternative therapies are good, dedicated physicians who believe in what they are doing. I believe in what they do as well, but I want my patients to understand that there is often much more that can be offered. My point is that even when all hope seems lost and even when life seems to offer no joy, do not give up. Seek the advice of a professional who can guide you "outside the box." My hope is that this article will help you begin to think differently about heart disease and the possibilities for improving the lives of those affected.

Conventional Medical Treatments

Standard therapies for CHF or weak hearts include diuretics to pull out the fluid accumulations and drugs that dilate the arteries so that the weak heart has less back pressure when it pumps. In order to decrease "risk factors" a statin drug is added to lower cholesterol and a defibrillator may be surgically implanted to stop serious arrhythmias when they occur. Unfortunately, none of these address the cause(s) and, worse yet, many of the drugs aggravate the problems. Statin drugs severely depress our ability to produce coenzyme Q, which is needed in the production of ATP (up to 50% reduction). Diuretics cause urinary loss of potassium and magnesium, both of which are required for the strength of heart beats and help prevent arrhythmias. Lasix (furosemide) also causes loss of thiamin (vitamin B1). Thiamin deficiency causes a form of CHF called beriberi.

Weakening of the heart muscles is most commonly due to poor circulation, viral infection, or toxic damage. The role of toxic damage is critical. One published study reported high levels of toxic metals in biopsy samples from hearts diagnosed with CHF. Compared to healthy heart muscles, there were 22,000 times more mercury, and 12,000 times more antimony in the weakened heart muscles. Other studies confirm a relationship between high lead levels and heart problems such as hypertension and circulation problems. There are ways to detoxify the body of heavy metals which are safe and very helpful.

Symptoms vary depending on the severity of the disease. In early stages, there may be decreased stamina, fatigue, and mild shortness of breath from exertion. With advancing damage, we might see loss of normal blood pressure and fluid backing up into the lungs and/or the legs. This later stage is called congestive heart failure or CHF. A reduction in the pumping action of the heart will decrease blood circulation through the body. Fluid in the lungs will decrease the amount of oxygen entering the blood and this will further weaken the heart.

Heart muscle that dies after a heart attack cannot be revived, however, much of heart weakness is due to impaired energy production in the damaged (but still living) heart muscle, so we must focus our energy on strengthening the muscle that is overworked.

Cellular energy in our bodies is produced in our mitochondria which are essentially energy factories present in all of our cells. Mitochondria are very susceptible to toxic damage, and our hearts have more mitochondria than any other part of our bodies. Skeletal muscles have 200 mitochondria per cell, but our hearts must be able to beat 24 hours per day without rest. Because of the remarkable energy requirements of these specialized muscles, our hearts have 5000 mitochondria per cell. The energy that is produced is stored in energy packets called ATP. ATP is produced when the mitochondria burn fuel. When oxygen is consumed in the energy production it is called aerobic energy. When oxygen is in short supply fats are burned without oxygen. This is called anaerobic (meaning without oxygen) metabolism. It is a fact that 60-70% of heart's energy comes from burning of fat rather than oxygen.

Natural Therapies to Increase ATP/Energy Production:

Coenzyme Q 10 is vital to mitochondrial energy production. Statins, B-blockers and amitriptyline block coenzyme Q production. Depletion is further exacerbated by supplements of vitamin E. Supplementation with common coenzyme Q or, better yet, the water soluble form called ubiquinol is frequently very helpful. Using non-statin alternatives to address cholesterol may also be advisable.

Ribose is needed for ATP production. Supplementing with large amounts of ribose is a safe and quite effective way to help the ailing heart. **Carnitine** is the amino acid that transports fats into mitochondria for anaerobic energy production. Many toxins interfere with carnitine production and supplementation can overcome the problem. Maintaining proper balance of **magnesium** and **potassium** can be achieved with supplementation although sometimes intravenous magnesium is necessary because of limitations of oral supplementation without causing diarrhea. The amino acid **taurine** helps move magnesium into muscle cells and **arginine** can help dilated arteries to decrease the back pressure on the heart and improve circulation.

Hawthorn Berry has been shown to increase blood flow to the heart and body. It is noteworthy that hawthorn will lower blood pressure if it is high but, remarkably, will raise the blood pressure if it is low and it has not caused the serious arrhythmias that complicate many drug therapies, in fact it decreases arrhythmias. Other herbs that may be helpful include **Lily of the Valley** (Convallaria Magus) and **Coleus Forskohlii**

Far Infrared Sauna therapy has been shown to increase ATP production and published studies showed benefit for CHF. We use this in our office and offer reasonably priced home units to allow daily use.

Some Hormone Related Suggestions:

Thyroid deficiency causes hypoxia (low oxygen) due to impaired oxidative phosphorylation (needed to make ATP), which is a thyroid dependent cellular process. This results in decreased ATP production, decreased adrenal function, increased lipids, decreased body temperature, increased platelet stickiness that gums up arteries, etc. Note that an individual may be "functionally" hypothyroid with normal thyroid tests. This is because much hypothyroidism is due to blockade or impaired function of the thyroid receptor and has nothing to do with the production of thyroid hormone.

Testosterone improves the strength of all muscles including heart. It also helps with arterial circulation **Growth Hormone** is more controversial but when it is used it can stimulate the increasing of heart muscle mass and pulmonary function in the failing individual.

Other Therapies

Evaluation and treatment of toxic loads may be necessary to bring the heart back to health. **Detoxification** can be a vital part of healing and can be combined with other therapies for maximal benefits. **Chelation** will not only remove toxic metals but may also improve circulation and hormone function. **Hyperbaric oxygen therapy** will induce new blood vessel formation to areas that are lacking blood flow. This may offer obvious help to hearts with poor circulation. These treatments are available in our office and for home use.