

## **NATURALLY REDUCING THE RISK OF CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE**

### **Fast, hard stats on the risk of developing cardiovascular disease (CVD)**

CVD includes all diseases and conditions of the heart and the blood vessels. Australian government statistics indicate that 3.4 million people had some form of CVD in 2007-8, with the most common being High Blood Pressure (2.1million) and Coronary Heart Disease (CHD) (0.7million). In 2007, nearly 47,000 deaths in Australia were attributed to CVD, with nearly half being attributable to CHD. At 34% of total deaths, CVD is responsible for more deaths than any other disease group (AIHW 2011). Fortunately however, good dietary and lifestyle choices can greatly reduce many of the key risk factors of CVD, which include smoking, lack of exercise, being overweight, excessive alcohol use and a poor diet (AIHW 2011). There are also several herbs which have been shown to be beneficial in CVD.

### **Lifestyle choices to reduce the risk**

#### ***Smoking***

Smoking rates have been steadily falling, but 17% of Australians still smoke daily. With smoking being the single most important cause of ill health and death in Australia, isn't it time to seriously consider quitting? (AIHW 2011).

#### ***Weight management & exercise***

While smoking rates decline, obesity rates are steadily increasing and ~60% of Australians are now overweight or obese. With around 70% Australians also not getting enough exercise, it's reasonable to deduce that simply introducing regular exercise into your routine may also help with weight loss (AIHW 2011). If you're guilty of being somewhat of a couch potato, its best to start introducing exercise slowly into your routine and persist until it becomes a habit. The key is to find an activity which you genuinely enjoy and to choose two or three days and times a week when you can feasibly slot it in. If you can keep to schedule for just 3 weeks, you are most likely to find that you actually WANT to get out of bed to enjoy the peace of an early morning walk with a friend (human or canine), to feel the sense of balance and stillness at the end of a yoga class or to work off the stresses of the day at an exercise class or in the pool. Give it a try for the sake of your heart and you are likely to benefit in more ways than one!!

### **Foods & Herbs for the heart**

#### ***Dark Chocolate***

No doubt about it, a gift of chocolate does make the heart grow fonder! Put away the guilt by choosing a good quality dark chocolate, which not only contains less sugar than milk or white chocolate, but also has a nice dose of antioxidant polyphenols (also found in many fruit & veg!). Portion sizes are the key here, but good quality chocolate is arguably more satisfying and has a higher polyphenol content than both milk and white chocolate (Langer et al 2011). A study providing dark chocolate to glucose-intolerant subjects with high blood pressure reported several health benefits, including improved insulin sensitivity and reduced blood pressure (Grassi et al 2008). As we suspected all along, it seems that treating yourself to a few squares of dark chocolate once or twice a week can make for a happy heart!!

### ***More flavonoids please***

Flavonoids are a sub-class of polyphenols derived from plants (Brat et al 2006). Studies demonstrate that regular consumption of flavonoids from plants can reduce CVD, particularly CHD and heart attacks. This is heart-warming news indeed as flavonoids are common antioxidant substances found not only in many edible fruits & vegetables, but also in tea and red wine! (Wang et al 2011). Particularly good fruit & vegetable sources of flavonoids include onions, apples, tomatoes, broccoli, raisins, grapes (Lin et al 2007), artichokes, parsley, brussels sprouts, strawberries & lychees (Brat et al 2006).

### ***Hawthorn extract***

Hawthorn extract exerts hypotensive, anti-arrhythmic, antioxidant, hypotensive and anti-inflammatory effects, which make it useful as both a preventative and a therapeutic treatment for various cardiovascular conditions (Braun & Cohen 2011, pp. 591-2). Hawthorn extracts protect the heart and blood vessels by strengthening the force of heart contraction, improving blood flow through the coronary artery (the blood vessel which delivers blood to the heart) and reducing cholesterol (Koch & Malek 2011).

The leaves and flowers of hawthorn contain around 1% flavonoids, which are attributed with its positive effects on the heart (Braun & Cohen 2011, p. 591). A Cochrane review of 14 trials of Hawthorn extract for treating chronic heart failure (CHF) concluded that hawthorn extract has significant benefits when used as complementary therapy alongside other treatments for CHF (NYHA stage II). Hawthorn extract made from dried leaves, flowers and fruits reduced symptoms of CHF including shortness of breath and fatigue and also improved several physiological measures including exercise tolerance. While some adverse events were reported they were considered mild, transient and infrequent (Guo et al 2009). However, hawthorn should be used with care in combination with other drugs affecting the heart (Braun & Cohen 2011, p. 596).

### ***Modify dietary fats***

Modifying, rather than simply reducing, total dietary fats can also reduce the risk of CVD. A Cochrane review of trials of dietary fat intake and CVD concluded that reducing total dietary fats, particularly saturated fats and partially replacing them with unsaturated fats, reduced the risk of CVD. Thus, a diet low in saturated animal fats and higher in unsaturated plant oils is beneficial for heart health (Hooper et al 2011). Overall dietary fat quality can be improved by choosing lean meats and fish and increasing consumption of unsaturated fats such as olive oil, almonds and brazil nuts. Improving dietary fat quality improves the overall Total : HDL cholesterol ratio and reduces the risk of CVD. In contrast, simply reducing all dietary fats also reduces 'good' fats such as HDL cholesterol, which does not reduce the risk of CVD (Scholl 2011).

### ***In Conclusion***

Dietary & lifestyle choices can help to reduce the risk of developing CVD. These include smoking cessation, losing weight, increasing exercise, moderating alcohol consumption and increasing dietary intake of flavonoid-rich fruits & vegetables. While remembering that moderation is key, substituting milk & white chocolate with dark chocolate and white wine with a drop of red will also benefit heart health. Last but not least, modifying dietary fats to improve overall dietary fat quality also contributes to a reduced risk of CVD.

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