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How Complementary Medicine Can Improve Your Life

Whether it's because of cost or just general principles, I think most people would rather not take medications if they didn't have to. I'd rather not. But we can't change the health baggage we bring with us. My dad died at 41 of a probable heart attack, and I had a cardiac stent 10 years ago; I can't change my genetic tendency toward heart disease even if my lifestyle is perfect. I exercise regularly, work hard to eat a better diet, take the supplements I feel research supports using given my genetics and health history, and continuously work at getting my body weight where it should be. I also take a small dose of a statin and 81 mg of aspirin a day. There are elements in the supplements and other parts of my lifestyle that complement the medications to keep the amounts of meds lower.

I've spent 15 years explaining the concept of complementary medicine, but I never really read anything in the research that illustrated how it could work when dealing with physicians. A recent commentary in the *New England Journal of Medicine* is probably as close as I'll ever get, given the way research is conducted on medications and supplements (1). Here's a synopsis of the arguments.

The Comments

The advantage of publishing research in peer-reviewed journals is that other scientists get to comment on what you've done. Just like anything, there's always some pettiness but for the most part, it makes a researcher think about what they may not have done correctly or did not explain fully. One such comment by Dr. Karl Swedborg concerned a review article on omega-3s that was published in June 2011 by Dr. Raffaele De Caterina (2). (By the way, it's a fascinating review of how omega-3s work and the science behind them. I'll be writing about it at some point or maybe even do an entire webinar on it. It would take that long to explain!) In the review article, De Caterina stated that a beneficial effect on mortality had not been shown in any contemporary trials on medications for chronic heart failure. Dr. Swedborg questioned that statement and provided two clinical trials that he thought supported his point of view.

Before going on, the critical fact was that the subjects had advanced heart disease. Most conventional treatments don't affect how long people live, but they may have a profound effect on their quality of life: there's a big difference in being bedridden for three years after a heart attack and being able to live a life afterwards. I would argue that an improved quality of life is important even if you don't live one extra day, and the longer we can stay out of the hospital, the more we like it.

Swedborg gave two examples of drug trials where mortality had decreased. De Caterina responded that the author was correct to a degree. In one trial, the outcome variables were different—they reported a decrease in hospitalizations, but overall mortality from heart disease was not decreased; omega-3s were not a part of that clinical trial.

In the second trial Swedborg cited, which was published after the review article, De Caterina pointed out that the omega-3s in the research he cited were given to people on medications to treat heart failure. Here's the important point: the decrease in mortality for those given omega-3s exceeded what the medications alone provided. And that's a perfect example of complementary medicine.

Here's the thing: there are ways of using medications together with lifestyle change and supplements to improve our quality of life and maybe even extend our lifespan. It shouldn't be an either/or scenario but the best of both worlds.

The Bottom Line

If I didn't work at my lifestyle, I would probably need even more medications to lower heart rate, lower blood pressure, and lower blood sugar. Many of you take those medications; I know you'd probably like to eliminate them, but that might not be possible. Remember, we all have health baggage we bring with us. However, you might be able to reduce the number of meds or the amounts you have to take. How? By complementing those medications with what we know will help reduce our risk of heart disease and any other type of disease—weight loss, exercise and, as in the case of these comments, the right supplements.

Once you set the goal and know what to do, it all comes down to one thing:

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

References:

1. N Engl J Med 2011;365:1159.
2. N Engl J Med 2011;364:2439-50.

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