

ALTERNATIVE MEDICATIONS IN CARDIOVASCULAR HEALTH

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Bilberry

Bilberry fruit contains chemicals known as anthocyanosides, plant pigments that have excellent antioxidant properties. They scavenge damaging particles in the body known as free radicals, helping to prevent or reverse damage to cells. Antioxidants have been shown to help prevent a number of long-term illnesses such as heart disease, cancer, and an eye disorder called macular degeneration.

Bilberry is theorized to help with chronic venous insufficiency, diabetes, atherosclerosis, diarrhea, wounds, and vision. No solid studies have been conducted to prove any of these theories.

The key compounds in bilberry fruit are called anthocyanosides. These compounds help build strong blood vessels and improve circulation to all areas of the body. They also prevent blood platelets from clumping together (helping to reduce the risk of blood clots), and they have antioxidant properties (preventing or reducing damage to cells from free radicals). Anthocyanidins boost the production of rhodopsin, a pigment that improves night vision and helps the eye adapt to light changes.

Bilberry fruit is also rich in tannins, a substance that acts as an astringent. The tannins have anti-inflammatory properties and may help control diarrhea. Bilberry fruit and extract are considered generally safe, with no known side effects. However, bilberry leaf and extract should not be taken in large quantities over an extended period of time because the tannins they contain may cause severe weight loss, muscle spasms, and even death.

Source:

University of Maryland Medical Center: <http://www.umm.edu/altmed/articles/bilberry-000225.htm>

Stinging Nettle

Stinging nettle is a plant that has historically been used as a diuretic and to treat joint pain. It has fine hairs on the leaves and stems that contain irritating chemicals that are released when the plant comes in contact with the skin. When they come into contact with a painful area of the body, they can actually decrease the original pain. Scientists think nettle does this by reducing levels of inflammatory chemicals in the body, and by interfering with the way the body transmits pain signals.

Stinging nettle has been used for hundreds of years to treat painful muscles and joints, eczema, arthritis, gout, and anemia. Today, many people use it to treat urinary problems during the early stages of an enlarged prostate (called benign prostatic hyperplasia or BPH), for urinary tract infections, for hay fever (allergic rhinitis), or in compresses or creams for treating joint pain, sprains and strains, tendonitis, and insect bites.

Some preliminary animal studies indicate that nettle may lower blood sugar and blood pressure, but there is not enough evidence to say whether this is also true in humans. In studies, it was shown that the juice made from this plant is a diuretic in people that have congestive heart failure. Stinging nettle has a very high content of vitamin K. It is often used as a blood thinner.

Sources:

University of Maryland Medical Center: <http://www.umm.edu/altmed/articles/stinging-nettle-000275.htm>

HealthMad: Herbal Use of Stinging Nettle: www.healthmad.com/alternative/herbal-use-of-stinging-nettle/

Saw Palmetto

Saw palmetto is a plant and is best known for its use in decreasing symptoms of BPH. Some people use saw palmetto for colds and coughs, sore throat, asthma, chronic bronchitis, chronic pelvic pain syndrome, and migraine headache. It is also used to increase urine flow (as a diuretic), to promote relaxation (as a sedative), and to enhance sexual drive (as an aphrodisiac).

Multiple mechanisms of action have been proposed, and saw palmetto appears to possess 5- α -reductase inhibitory activity (thereby preventing the conversion of testosterone to dihydrotestosterone). Hormonal/estrogenic effects have also been reported, as well as direct inhibitory effects on androgen receptors and anti-inflammatory properties.

Evidence for BPH efficacy: Numerous human trials report that saw palmetto improves symptoms of benign prostatic hypertrophy (BPH) such as nighttime urination, urinary flow, and overall quality of life, although it may not greatly reduce the size of the prostate. The effectiveness may be similar to the medication finasteride (Proscar®) with fewer side effects.

Evidence for male pattern hair loss: It has been suggested that saw palmetto may block some effects of testosterone and therefore reduce male pattern hair loss.

Sources:

Medline Plus: <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/druginfo/natural/971.html>

Mayoclinic: http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/saw-palmetto/NS_patient-sawpalmetto

Lycopene

Lycopene is a carotenoid present in human serum and skin as well as the liver, adrenal glands, lungs, prostate and colon. Lycopene has been found to possess antioxidant and antiproliferative properties in animal and laboratory studies, although activity in humans remains controversial.

Numerous studies correlate high intake of lycopene-containing foods or high lycopene serum levels with reduced incidence of cancer, cardiovascular disease, and macular degeneration. However, estimates of lycopene consumption have been based on reported tomato intake, not on the use of lycopene supplements. Since tomatoes are sources of other nutrients, including vitamin C, folate, and potassium, it is not clear that lycopene itself is beneficial.

Lycopene has been studied for a variety of reasons. As an antioxidant, it may help asthma-induced exercise, atherosclerosis/CAD, BPH, CA prevention (breast, GI, lung, ovarian, prostate), ocular disorders, gingivitis, HTN in preeclampsia, infertility, kidney disease, oral mucositis, and sun protection. Evidence for all these indications is unclear; so a direct link to lycopene cannot be established.

Source:

Mayoclinic: http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/lycopene/NS_patient-lycopene

Echinacea

Traditionally used for a range of infections and malignancies, the roots and herb of echinacea species have attracted recent scientific interest due to purported “immune stimulant” properties. Several laboratory and animal studies suggest that echinacea contains active substances that enhance the activity of the immune system, relieve pain, reduce inflammation, and have hormonal, antiviral, and antioxidant effects. For this reason, professional herbalists may recommend

echinacea to treat urinary tract infections, vaginal yeast (candida) infections, ear infections (also known as otitis media), athlete's foot, sinusitis, hay fever (also called allergic rhinitis), as well as slow-healing wounds.

Despite its many purported uses for Echinacea, there is good scientific evidence for prevention *and* treatment of URIs.

Evidence for URI prevention: Preliminary studies suggest that echinacea is not helpful for preventing the common cold in adults. A recent meta-analysis suggested that standardized extracts of echinacea were effective in the prevention of symptoms of the common cold after clinical inoculation, compared with placebo. In children, a combination of echinacea, propolis, and vitamin C has been reported to reduce the number and duration of cold episodes. However, prevention research overall has not been well designed, and additional trials are needed before a clear conclusion can be drawn. B

Evidence for URI treatment: Although multiple low quality studies have previously suggested that taking echinacea by mouth by adults when cold symptoms begin may reduce the length and severity of symptoms, a clinical trial reported in July 2005 did not demonstrate any clinical benefit. Recent meta-analyses are conflicting; one suggested that standardized extracts of echinacea were effective in the prevention of symptoms of the common cold after clinical inoculation, compared with placebo, whereas the other reported no such benefit. Further research is needed.

Source:

Mayoclinic: http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/echinacea/NS_patient-echinacea/DSECTION=evidence