













Merry Christmas from the team at Research Review

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Welcome to our final issue of Natural Health Review for 2011.

Highlights this month include a study showing that a twice daily drink of tart Montmorency cherry juice concentrate can improve sleep quality by stimulating melatonin release. This excellent study showed that a natural alternative can be used if melatonin is hard to get, or anywhere where a different form is preferred. And an intriguing, well-designed small study found that two tropical food drinks, coconut (*Cocos nucifera*) water and mauby (*Colubrina arborescens*), reduced blood pressure in patients with hypertension when taken regularly.

Merry Christmas and best wishes for 2012 from all of the Research Review team.

Kind Regards,

Prof Shaun Holt
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Cherry juice improves sleep



The facts:

- 20 volunteers drank 30ml of placebo or tart Montmorency cherry juice concentrate twice daily for 7 days each to determine the effects of cherry juice on sleep quality.
- Cherry juice significantly increased circulating melatonin levels (the hormone responsible for sleep regulation), total sleep time and sleep efficiency.
- Tart Montmorency cherry juice could therefore be useful for people who have difficulty sleeping because of low melatonin levels e.g. shift workers or those with insomnia or jet lag.

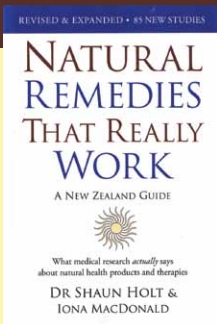
Prof Shaun Holt:

Melatonin is a unique product in regulatory terms ... in some countries such as the USA it can be bought from the corner shop and in others such as New Zealand you need a prescription from a doctor. There is no doubt that it is effective for insomnia and this excellent study shows that a natural alternative can be used in places where melatonin is hard to get, or anywhere where a different form is preferred. Cherry juice contains substances that lead to increased levels of melatonin ... and relief from insomnia.

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22038497>

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Tropical fruit drinks may reduce hypertension

The facts:

- 28 patients with hypertension drank 10 ounces of bottled water, coconut water, mauby (a tropical drink made from buckthorn tree bark) or a coconut and mauby mixture twice daily for 2 weeks to determine the effects of the tropical ingredients on blood pressure.
- The groups who drank coconut water, mauby or their combination all showed significant decreases in blood pressure over the 2-week period while over half of those who drank the bottled water had increases in blood pressure.
- Coconut water and mauby may therefore be effective natural remedies for lowering blood pressure in patients with hypertension.



Prof Shaun Holt:

This intriguing but well-designed small study found that regular drinking of two tropical food drinks, coconut (*Cocos nucifera*) water and mauby (*Colubrina arborescens*) both reduced blood pressure. And the “dose” needed: 10 ounces twice a day. We know that, on the whole, people are terrible at taking their prescribed pills for high blood pressure regularly, probably because they do not feel any symptoms from the condition, and so a tasty natural and maybe even safer alternative may give better results. As always, more research needed, but this has huge potential.

<http://tinyurl.com/7vzb4kl>

Resveratrol has health benefits in obese patients

The facts:

- 11 obese men were treated with placebo or resveratrol 150 mg/day for 30 days to see whether the health benefits of resveratrol reported in animal models of obesity could also apply to humans.
- Resveratrol slowed metabolism and reduced levels of liver fat, blood pressure and blood sugar.
- Although unlikely to make obese patients thin again, resveratrol could slow down the problems associated with lifelong obesity.

Prof Shaun Holt:

I would argue that some of the claims that have been made about resveratrol have been exaggerated and based mostly on animal research studies. However, this small study in obese people has found promising evidence that it may be effective in helping to reduce obesity in humans, as it appears to do in animal models. When taken regularly for a few weeks it produced similar benefits to low-calorie diets and endurance training, in that it lowered the metabolic rate, so that the body needs less food to generate enough energy, and reduced levels of liver fat, blood pressure and blood sugar.

<http://tinyurl.com/6o8bm63>

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Vitamin D deficiency hinders recovery after knee surgery

The facts:

- Vitamin D levels in patients with anterior cruciate ligament damage were measured 2 weeks before and 3 months after undergoing surgery.
- People with vitamin D levels <30 ng/ml were found to have less strength in their recovering knees than patients with higher vitamin D levels.
- Vitamin D therefore appears to hinder strength recovery after anterior cruciate ligament surgery.

Prof Shaun Holt:

Researchers are looking at dozens of potential medical benefits that having higher levels of vitamin D may bring, and as someone who has ruptured his anterior cruciate ligament twice, I was particularly interested in this study. We know that vitamin D is important in terms of strengthening bones, but this interesting study found that low vitamin D appear to hinder strength recovery after anterior cruciate ligament surgery. Up to 85% of people are deficient in vitamin D and so many people should consider taking a supplement if they do not get enough in their diet.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/2156587211413768>



Independent commentary by
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People who take supplements tend to eat better too



The facts:

- A study in over 8000 adults compared dietary intakes of minerals in supplement users and non-users.
- People who regularly consumed mineral supplements were found to have higher mineral intakes from food than nonusers.
- Supplement use reduced the likelihood of mineral deficiencies but did contribute to a risk of potentially excessive intakes for some minerals, including calcium, iron, zinc, and magnesium.

Prof Shaun Holt:

The key to vitamin and mineral supplements is to make sure that you are getting enough ... but not too much. This interesting study found that people who take supplements are more likely to have a better diet in terms of its mineral content, therefore the risk is that they could potentially take too much of some nutrients, particularly calcium, iron, zinc, and magnesium. On the plus side they are much less likely to have a deficiency. It is not easy and I still think that the best advice is to take a multivitamin supplement alongside a good diet and not to have multiple mineral supplements.

<http://www.ajcn.org/content/94/5/1376.abstract>

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Fair skinned people need vitamin D supplements

The facts:

- A study from the University of Leeds has found that the optimal amount of vitamin D required by the body is at least 60 nmol/L.
- For many individuals, this level can be achieved naturally by spending time in the sun on summer weekends and on hot holidays.
- However, fair-skinned individuals who burn easily are not able to make enough vitamin D from safe exposure to sunlight and may need to take vitamin D supplements, as must patients with skin cancer.



Prof Shaun Holt:

Health professionals are struggling with what we should recommend in terms of sun exposure, and this study, although important, potentially makes this even harder. It's a fine balance between getting enough sun exposure, thereby reducing the chances of poor bone health from a lack of vitamin D, and getting too much sun, and increasing the risk of skin cancer. The general recommendation is that 10 to 15 minutes of sun exposure without sunscreen during the summer months is about the right amount, but this study shows that this recommendation does not apply to everyone – fair-skinned people who burn easily may not be able to make enough vitamin D from sunlight and so may need to take vitamin D supplements.

<http://www.springerlink.com/content/1wk20553284hx713/>

Fish oils may slow or prevent osteoarthritis progression

The facts:

- Guinea pigs that naturally develop osteoarthritis were fed a diet rich in omega-3 fatty acids to determine the effects of fish oils on the development and progression of osteoarthritis.
- Classic early signs of osteoarthritis, such as the degradation of collagen in cartilage and the loss of its shock-absorbing properties, were both reduced by omega-3.
- There was strong evidence to suggest that omega-3 not only helps prevent osteoarthritis, but also slows its progression.

Prof Shaun Holt:

This is an animal study, and so the usual caveats apply, but it does provide compelling evidence that omega-3 fatty acids could be effective in reducing the burden of osteoarthritis. Fish oil is far more effective than flax oil based supplements, but for vegetarians, flax oil remains a viable alternative. The lead researcher commented that "... most diets in the developed world are lacking in omega-3, with modern diets having up to 30 times too much omega-6 and too little omega-3. Taking omega-3 will help redress this imbalance and may positively contribute to a range of other health problems such as heart disease and colitis". Further studies are needed to confirm the effects in human osteoarthritis.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.joca.2011.06.005>

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Yoga and stretching are both good for chronic low back pain

The facts:

- 228 adults with chronic low back pain underwent 12 weekly classes of yoga or conventional stretching exercises, or used a self-care book, to compare the 3 commonly used treatments for chronic low back pain.
- Yoga classes and stretching classes were more effective than a self-help book at improving function and reducing symptoms in patients with chronic low back pain, with benefits lasting at least several months.
- Participants in both exercise groups were able to cut back on their medication use over time.

Prof Shaun Holt:

Who doesn't have a bad back?! Lower back pain is one of the most common medical conditions, yet we still do not know what are the best ways to treat it. This practical study found that both yoga classes and stretching classes were approximately equally effective in improving function and reducing symptoms. Fewer pain-relieving medications were needed and, interestingly, the benefits lasted for at least several months in many cases.

<http://tinyurl.com/6gm6qmd>

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White fruits and vegetables reduce stroke risk

The facts:

- A study of over 20,000 men and women followed for 10 years investigated which fruit and vegetable colour groups have the most benefits on stroke risk.
- Higher intakes of white fruits and vegetables (e.g. apples and pears) were associated with a reduced risk of stroke over a 10-year period, whereas consumption of green, orange/yellow, and red/purple fruits and vegetables had no impact.
- High intake of white fruits and vegetables may therefore protect against stroke.



Prof Shaun Holt:

I did not realise, but the colour of the edible portion of fruits and vegetables often reflects the presence of beneficial phytochemicals such as carotenoids and flavonoids. There are 4 main colour types: Green (dark leafy vegetables such as cabbages and lettuces), Orange/Yellow (mostly citrus fruits), Red/Purple (mostly red vegetables) and White (e.g. apples and pears). The remarkable finding from this study was that the risk of stroke was 52 percent lower for people with a high intake of white fruits and vegetables and each 25 gram per day increase in white fruits and vegetable consumption was associated with a 9 percent lower risk of stroke.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1161/STROKEAHA.110.611152>

Mediterranean diet and exercise reduce sleep apnoea

The facts:

- 40 obese patients suffering from sleep apnoea were told to either follow a prudent diet or a Mediterranean diet for 6 months. All of them were also encouraged to walk for at least 30 minutes per day, and to wear an air mask at night.
- People following the Mediterranean diet had fewer disturbances during REM sleep, and showed a greater adherence to the calorie-restricted diet, an increase in physical activity and a greater decrease in abdominal fat than people following the prudent diet.
- A Mediterranean diet combined with physical activity for 6 months therefore reduces apnoea-related disturbances during REM sleep in obese adults with moderate to severe sleep apnoea.

Prof Shaun Holt:

Obstructive sleep apnea syndrome (OSAS) causes frequent pauses in breathing during sleep, disrupting a person's normal sleeping pattern. It is one of the most prevalent sleep-related breathing disorders, affecting 2–4% of the adult population, rising to 20–40% in people with obesity. Weight loss is usually part of the treatment programme. This study showed that eating a Mediterranean diet, combined with physical activity, can help to improve some of the symptoms of sleep apnoea, more so than a standard calorie-restricting diet.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1183/09031936.00103411>

