

Herbal medicine for Longevity

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“I don't want to attain immortality through my work. I want to attain immortality through not dying”. Woody Allen.

In the USA the last 100 years or so has seen a rapid increase in life expectancy., reflecting improved nutritional status, better living conditions, shorter work weeks and improved health care. Living to 100 is becoming more common and 120 is not so unrealistic as it might have been a generation or two ago. But longevity is meaningless without good health - nobody wants to be old *and* sick. Perhaps we should be talking about quality of life rather than quantity.

Aging can be defined by several different criteria:

- **chronological age** - actual number of years alive
- **biological age** - a general term encompassing loss of muscle strength and endurance, loss of ability to resist disease, wrinkling of the skin due to loss of collagen and elastin, loss of hair and teeth.
- **psychological age** - how old you feel and think you are
- **social age** - how you are treated and categorized by society

Of these, biological and psychological aging are the areas over which we can exert the most direct control. We can accelerate or retard aging by what we eat and drink, whether we take drugs or smoke tobacco, the quality of air we breathe, the type and amount of exercise we take, the way we think and feel, the kind of personal relations we cultivate, the type of work we choose and so on.

Most cellular aging is a direct result of oxidation due to the presence of free radicals. Many factors contribute to this oxidation process. Environmental pollution in food, air and water, processed foods especially fats and sugars, chronic stress, poor circulation due to lack of exercise and dehydration may all be significant factors.

Exercise

Regular aerobic exercise in an unpolluted environment is essential for longevity. Oxygen is the life blood of the cells and exercise ensures that the blood vessels stay patent and the heart functions optimally. 30 minutes of vigorous exercise three times a week is generally considered sufficient for heart health.

Diet

Several dietary and nutritional factors may contribute to promoting longevity. Refined and processed carbohydrates rob the body of vital nutrients and contribute to diabetes, heart disease and cancer. Processed fats, especially the trans fatty acids, plug the arteries and damage the liver as well as contributing significantly to oxidative damage in the body. Pesticide, fungicide, herbicide and fertilizer residues on food may disrupt essential enzyme processes in the body, promote Parkinson's Disease and Alzheimer's Disease and contribute to the development of cancer. Hormone and antibiotic residues in meat and milk may tax the immune system and liver. Inadequate water intake may contribute to oxidative damage. Obesity is also a noted risk factor in premature death. 1500 - 2000 calories daily is adequate for most people with normal activity levels. Low levels of fibre in the diet may contribute to increased cholesterol levels in the blood as well as to constipation, diverticular disease and bowel cancer.

Essentially the optimum diet should comprise only organically grown foods and 1 glass of filtered or spring water for every 20 lbs of body weight. All carbohydrates should be unrefined and all fats should be unprocessed and of vegetable origin except for the inclusion of fatty, cold water fish. Most of the protein should be of vegetable origin. Any meat that is eaten should come from range fed animals. The ratio of nutrients in a well balanced diet is approximately 30% each carbohydrate and fat and 40% protein but it is the *quality* of the food that is more significant than the exact proportions.

NUTRITIONAL SUPPLEMENTS

Digestive enzymes and probiotics

As we age the production of digestive juices is frequently diminished and regular the balance of bowel flora disrupted. Impaired digestion and poor assimilation of nutrients results. By supplementing with a range of digestive enzymes and with lactobacillus acidophilus and other suitable strains of bacteria, it is possible to greatly improve the underlying nutritional state of the body and thus contribute to overall well being.

Anti-oxidants

Because aging is effectively the result of free radical damage, anti-oxidants are especially important in promoting longevity. These may include vitamins A, C and E, beta carotene, zinc, selenium, and flavonoids & proanthocyanidins such as are found in Bilberry, Pine bark, grape seed, green tea and Gingko. Recent research into natural food preservatives has shown the essential oil of Rosemary to be a very powerful anti-oxidant (Note: do not take essential oils internally without supervision)

Energy tonics

Co enzyme Q10 promotes optimum heart function and so improves oxygenation of the tissues. Chlorella, spirulina, wheat grass, barley grass and blue green algae promote energy by improving the oxygen-carrying ability of red blood cells and by enhancing the removal of wastes from the tissues.

Others

Lecithin may be useful to enhance elasticity and the healing power of the brain and nervous tissue. Calcium and magnesium are required for strong healthy bones. Melatonin (a hormone produced in the pineal gland) may promote production of growth hormone which is a key regulator of the immune system, and assists the body in healing and repairing itself.

HERBAL SUPPORT

Bitters

While supplementing with digestive enzymes is sometimes necessary to kick start a severely weakened system, often the gentle stimulation of bitter herbs will activate the body's own production of digestive juices. All the bitter tasting herbs generate a nerve reflex that increases the production of all digestive juices in the stomach, small intestine and pancreas, as well as enhancing liver function and normal bowel function. Herbs to use might include Centaury (*Erythrea centaurea*), Gentian (*Gentiana lutea*), Dandelion root or leaf (*Taraxacum off.*) or Motherwort (*Leonurus cardiaca*). The bitters are best taken before a meal and need to be tasted to be effective. A great many herbs are bitters and the choice of which to use often depends upon the secondary actions and attributes of the individual herbs.

Circulatory stimulants and tonics

Enhancing the circulation, especially to the head, and strengthening heart function, are both important aspects of promoting longevity. Although free radical oxidation damage is caused by 'rogue' oxygen molecules, never the less, impaired oxygenation of the tissues is a major factor in premature aging. All metabolic processes depend upon adequate provision of oxygen and the removal of waste products from the tissues - both function of the circulatory system. Some of the herbs which are especially noted for the beneficial action in this system include Gingko (*Gingko biloba*) which enhances blood supply to the brain, thus improving all mental functioning, and reduces atherosclerotic plaques in the blood vessels, Hawthorn (*Crataegus oxyacanthoides*) which acts as a tonic to the heart to strengthen cardiac function and reduce hypertension, and Periwinkle (*Vinca major / minor*) which enhances the ability of the brain to utilize oxygen and glucose and which thus stimulates brain function.

Adrenal tonics

Reduced energy and impaired enthusiasm are key features of aging which may be successfully addressed through adrenal support. The adrenal glands produce adrenalin, the hormone associated with activity and movement. As this declines over the decades so we discover that our 'get up and go' has gotten up and gone! Herbs that are tonic and nourishing to the adrenal glands include all the Ginseng species (Korean, Siberian and others), Licorice (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*), Blue vervain (*Verbena off. / hastata*), Borage (*Borago off.*) and Fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*).

Immune support

Insults to the immune system may come in the form of environmental pollution, inadequate sleep, poor nutrition and chronic stress as well as from viruses, bacteria and other disease processes. Over the course of a lifetime this can add up to quite an attack on the defense system and may lead to immune weakness in the elderly with poor healing ability and reduced resistance to infectious diseases. Herbs which may enhance immune function include Milk vetch (*Astragalus membranaceus*) which promotes the formation of white blood cells in the bone marrow and Purple cone flower (*Echinacea spp.*) which increases the ability of white blood cells to mop up microbial pathogens and to fight infection.

Sample formula for arthritis and muscular rheumatism - to reduce symptoms of stiffness, aching and cramping in the muscles and pain or swelling in the joints.

Devil's claw (<i>Harpagophytum pro.</i>)	1 part
Celery (<i>Apium graveolens</i>)	1 part
Meadowsweet (<i>Filipendula ulmaris</i>)	2 parts
Prickly ash (<i>Zanthoxylum spp.</i>)	1 part
White willow (<i>Salix alba</i>)	1 part
Black cohosh (<i>Cimicifuga racemosa</i>)	1 part

Sample formula for poor sleep - to reduce insomnia and promote deep and restful sleep.

Valerian (<i>Valeriana off.</i>)	1 part
Passionflower (<i>Passiflora incarnata</i>)	1 part
Hops (<i>Humulus lupulus</i>)	1 part
Chamomile (<i>Chamomilla recutita</i>)	1 part
Skullcap (<i>Scutalleria lateriflora</i>)	1 part
Jamaican dogwood (<i>Piscidia erythrina</i>)	1 part

Approximate doses would be 1 teaspoon if in tincture form or 1 -2 teaspoons of raw herb per cup of hot water if taken as a tea. This should be repeated 2 - 4 times daily as needed.

These formulas are generally safe for self treatment but if symptoms persist you should consult with a qualified health professional