

Excerpt from...

The Uncommon Doctor: Dr. Joe's Rx for Managing Your Health **Dr Joe Prendergast**

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CHAPTER 7: Nutricional Supplements

My entire approach to practicing medicine changed when I was thirty-seven years old. I was diagnosed with generalized atherosclerosis, a threat of atherosclerotic heart disease. Atherosclerotic heart disease is the underlying cause of heart attacks and one of the main causes of congestive heart failure. It starts early in life, as cholesterol plaque builds up in the arteries of the heart and brain. Such build-up can increase the risk of heart attacks and strokes. The condition silently worsens with age. Although a family history of heart disease can make you more likely to develop the disease, smoking, diabetes, high cholesterol, and hypertension are all major contributing factors. In my case, I probably inherited the same heart disease that led to my father's stroke.

When I became aware of my condition, I thought, "This is it. I'm a doctor. I know what can happen here. I'm going to do something." But what was there to do? I knew that there was nothing in the framework of existing medicine that would adequately help me. Prescription drugs alone wouldn't do it.

In a moment of clarity, I said, "Okay. I'm not just a doctor. I am a metabolic specialist. If anybody can do this, I can. I've got to look at the way I live my entire life. Are some of my habits harming me? What am I doing that is good for me? Am I getting enough exercise?" So many variables ran through my head. I decided that I would give myself a total assessment and rid myself of the disease. And that is exactly what I did, even though almost no one at the time thought such a thing was possible.

L'Arginine

I was diagnosed with atherosclerotic heart disease after a CAT scan of my stomach showed that I had calcification of the arteries. I started researching my condition by talking to colleagues and reading about new studies. That's how I found out about experiments that indicated L-arginine could be a powerful weapon against heart disease.

Arginine, which is an amino acid, is a protein that benefits the body in a myriad of ways. Discovered in 1895, arginine plays an important part in cell division, boosting immunity, healing wounds, and the secretion of hormones. When your body is under attack from infections or wounds, it burns through arginine quickly, so hospitals often give the supplement, L-arginine, to patients to speed recovery. In 1998, the Nobel Prize was awarded to three American scientists for their discovery in the role that arginine plays in the production of nitric oxide in the body. Nitric oxide is a dilator, meaning it helps the arteries relax and grow larger.

In 1991, I started taking 500mg of L-arginine twice a day. This was a very low dosage, so I wasn't sure it would have a measurable affect on my condition. After taking L-arginine for a while, I went to see the same radiologist for another CAT scan. We were both stunned by the results. The radiologist said to me, "How did you do this? You have gotten rid of all of the build-up in your arteries. You have reversed your condition. That's not possible!"

Thrilled and surprised by the CAT scan, I went for more tests, including a heart scan, to see how much atherosclerosis was affecting my heart. The heart scan came back as a zero, meaning I had no measurable atherosclerosis! My father had suffered a stroke in his forties and died in his early fifties from the same disease I had just reversed in myself.

Now that I had incorporated L-arginine into my life, I decided it was time to introduce it into my professional practice. The results have been nothing short of miraculous. In 1991, 30% of my diabetic patients ended up seeing a cardiologist for bypass procedures. I started routinely recommending L-arginine. In just nine short years, less than 1% of my patients needed to see a cardiologist for any reason. Since 1991, my practice has not had one patient suffer from a heart attack or stroke. It gives me great satisfaction to report that we have virtually reversed all heart disease, even in the patients who have other diabetes-related problems. We have always heard that you can't make progress in treating heart disease in diabetics until the patient has complete control over their blood glucose levels. That's obviously not true!

One of my friends and colleagues is a well-respected cardiologist. I used to refer a lot of patients to him. Recently, he said to me, "Did I do something to offend you? I've noticed that you no longer send patients to me." I said, "It's not you. I'm not sending my patients to anyone. They don't need cardiologists because we are reversing their heart disease!"

Arginine affects the entire vascular system. Because it makes arteries relax, blood flows better throughout the body. It also has had an unexpected, positive impact on plaque build up. Researchers have discovered that arginine therapy can reduce LDL, or "bad", cholesterol but does not reduce HDL, or "good", cholesterol. Medical professionals used to think that plaque would accumulate in the arteries until it completely closed them off. That's not correct. We now know that as plaque gets bigger, it becomes unstable and causes little breaks, or cuts, in the artery. The cuts then clot to stop the bleeding. This is dangerous. You obviously do not want clotting in your arteries. The clots also start a cascading effect of coagulation within the vascular system. Tiny clots begin to form in the brain, lungs, and other areas. Several studies have concluded that, in people with high cholesterol, L-arginine reduces the risk of blood platelets clumping, therefore lessening the chance of stroke and heart attacks.

There is good reason to believe that L-arginine can relieve hypertension by restoring blood pressure. In 1998, Italian researchers reported that daily doses of arginine reduced systolic blood pressure. This is major news for many reasons, not the least of which is that it could allow people to cut back on their prescription blood pressure medications, therefore reducing the risk of side effects like depression.

The benefits of L-arginine just keep stacking up. In addition to reducing heart disease, we are now learning more about how L-arginine helps the body release important hormones, increase lean muscle mass, speed wound recovery, and boost the immune system. Because L-arginine promotes healthy blood flow, it can also stimulate sexuality by decreasing impotence and female sexual dysfunction. There is also research to suggest that it can help Alzheimer's patients retard tumor growth, and help men with fertility problems.

You can get L-arginine from many types of foods, including dairy products, meat, fish, and chocolate. However, the average daily intake of L-arginine usually only meets the body's basic requirements for tissue repair and cell maintenance. L-arginine supplements provide much more of the amino acid available to your body for its many other purposes.

A typical supplement dose is about 2 grams a day, but in clinical trials of patients with congestive heart failure, as much as 15 grams a day has been successfully administered. I was able to reverse my atherosclerosis with only two 500mg doses a day. I now recommended more than that for my patients. The toxicity level for amino acids is 50 to 500 times the therapeutic dose range, so there is little danger of taking too much. However, high-dose L-arginine supplementation may result in watery diarrhea and sometimes stomach cramps and headaches. People with herpes and other viral infections should not take L-arginine supplements because it appears to promote the viral growth.

I believe that L-arginine is the single most important discovery in preventing heart disease that I have seen during the course of my medical career. Of course, there are many treatments for heart disease, but I haven't seen anything as effective. Pharmaceutical representatives for cholesterol-

lowering statins get excited about a drug that shows a 30% success rate in lowering cholesterol. They tell me about their products and I say, "I think 99% is a pretty good success rate. What do you think?" There is a place for statins, but I don't think they are the most successful approach.

We cannot ignore the power of L-arginine any more. Heart disease is the number one killer in our country for both men and women. The main factors are arteriosclerosis, hardening of the arteries, and atherosclerosis, buildup on the arterial lining. L-arginine reverses both problems.

Nutraceuticals

Thanks to my success with L-arginine, I have made a gradual move to incorporating natural products into my treatment plans for patients. I have become a major advocate of nutraceuticals as part of total body care. Nutraceuticals are natural compounds, such as vitamins and minerals, omegas, and herbal extracts that can prevent, and in some cases even reverse, disease. You may sometimes hear nutraceuticals referred to as phytochemicals or functional foods. Nutraceuticals are substances that have health value beyond the traditional nutrients they contain.

Nutraceuticals are becoming more popular, as educated patients become increasingly proactive in pursuing wellness. Some people turn to nutraceuticals because they are justifiably frustrated with medicine that only treats disease. They want to prevent disease. Others are angered by the high cost of prescription drugs. Still, many others are drawn to nutraceuticals because they are hoping to reverse some aspects of the aging process, such as wrinkling of the skin or decrease in sex drive.

In order to understand nutraceuticals, you must understand the important role phytochemicals play in our bodies. We all know that we need food in order to supply our body with essential nutrients. Essential nutrients are the vitamins, minerals, fats, and proteins that we require in order to live. Unlike essential nutrients, we don't need phytochemicals to survive. However, phytochemicals are important because they protect us from diseases, including cancer and heart disease.

Phytochemicals come mostly from fruits and vegetables. You've been eating phytochemicals and nutraceuticals your whole life, but you might not have known it. Almost all plant foods contain nutraceuticals. Recently, products and supplements have been created and marketed that contain higher amounts of nutraceuticals than occur naturally in foods. Go into any supermarket and you are bound to see breakfast cereal touting "added isoflavones" or margarine that has cholesterol-lowering compounds. They can be valuable because they provide more important compounds than you could realistically expect to eat, even with a healthy diet. An acre of broccoli and a small dose of folic acid do the same thing; which would you rather have?

There are undoubtedly many nutraceuticals that we have not even discovered yet. I've already told you about L-arginine. Here is a breakdown of some other commonly known nutraceuticals that have been shown to lower your risk of a host of diseases:

- Isoflavones are found in soy foods and may reduce the risk of some cancers.
- Flavonoids are powerful antioxidants with hormonal properties. There are hundreds of compounds that can be considered flavonoids. A diet rich in flavonoids can protect the body against many types of cancer. While many vegetables and fruits are packed with flavonoids, some of the best sources of are tomatoes, kale, and onions.
- Lignans are found in flaxseed and rye. They have anti-estrogen properties that could reduce the risk of breast cancer.
- Indoles are found in cruciferous vegetables like broccoli. They may reduce the risk of estrogen-related cancers.

- Lycopene is a carotenoid that gives the red color to tomatoes, watermelon, and pink grapefruit. There is evidence that it can reduce the risk of multiple forms of cancer, including lung, bladder, prostate, cervix, and skin.
- Beta-carotene is a powerful antioxidant and cancer fighter. This is a phytochemical that most people know about. Sources include carrots, sweet potatoes, and leafy green vegetables.
- Lutein can reduce the risk of cancer and macular degeneration. Lutein may also help prevent atherosclerosis. The best sources include leafy green vegetables.
- Allyl sulfides help eliminate toxic compounds in the body. Best sources include onions, leeks, and scallions.
- Dithiolthiones and isothiocyanates can help the body detoxify cancer-causing compounds by increasing the activity of beneficial enzymes. Good sources include cruciferous vegetables, like broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, and Brussels sprouts.
- Quercetin gives red apples and red onions their color. This anti-oxidant is a natural anti-inflammatory and anti-histamine. There is evidence that it can prevent some forms of cancer, including prostate.

There is another vitamin that we have heard about, but are only now starting to know its amazing ability to ward off disease. There is mounting evidence that vitamin D can help prevent many forms of cancer. About six years ago, doctors started to discover that patients given high doses of vitamin D experienced 80% less breast cancer and 90% less lung cancer! The problem is that the vast majority of us are not getting nearly enough vitamin D to experience its full benefits.

Vitamin D is found in foods, including fortified milk. Our body also makes vitamin D when we are exposed to sunlight. However, it is almost impossible to get a therapeutic dose from diet and sunlight alone. Plus, exposure to too much sunlight can increase the risk of skin cancer.

Years ago, the government decided how much vitamin D Americans should be getting and they began to add it to milk. That's why milk contains vitamin D. The problem is that their figures were way off". I believe that we should be getting about 3,000 IUs each day. Unfortunately, it is illegal to put that amount in something sold over-the-counter. You need a prescription to get the proper dosage of vitamin D. If you do take larger-than-recommended doses of vitamin D, it is very important to periodically monitor your blood levels to prevent toxicity. I am hoping this will change as the benefits of vitamin D become more widely understood and expected.

Overall, I am very pleased to see more people learn about various supplements, including manufactured nutraceuticals. However, I caution against taking any supplement before researching the product or talking with your physician. The amount of nutrients and amino acids you need is influenced by your gender, diet, and even where you live. What is right for someone else may be totally wrong for you.

Furthermore, don't fall into the trap of thinking that supplements are enough to maintain good health. Supplements cannot replace a balanced diet. Eat as many fruits and vegetables as you can. They are naturally rich in nutraceuticals. The supplement dose does not replace the broccoli.

Read the Book... you'll find the rest, just as interesting!