

Ayurvedic Approaches to Heart Disease

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Throughout the developed world, coronary artery disease is the foremost cause of morbidity and mortality, causing over half a million deaths a year in the US alone. To a great extent, the disease is lifestyle-related, and results from a kapha-provoking sedentary lifestyle, coupled with excess consumption of fatty foods, especially trans-fats, and insufficient intake of fruits and vegetables. *Pitta* factors such as stress and overwork are also known to play a major role. “Metabolic syndrome”, as it is currently described, is the precursor to heart disease. Consisting of abdominal obesity, elevated serum cholesterol and triglycerides, elevated blood pressure, insulin resistance and a prothrombotic state (sticky blood that clots too easily), metabolic syndrome could more accurately be called *kapha* syndrome.

Modern, reductionist physiology has tended to see the heart’s importance mainly in terms of its action as a circulatory pump. However, contemporary research shows that the heart is also an endocrine gland, producing neurotransmitters in response to emotional stimuli. The heart produces adrenaline and dopamine as well as oxytocin, the “love hormone.” (1, 2).

These findings only serve to validate the perspective of the Ayurvedic classics, which describe the heart as the seat of consciousness, known as *hridaya*, from which our word “heart” originates, as well as *mahat*—the great.

“The body with six divisions, sense organs, five sense objects, atma (self) together with qualities, mind along with its objects are located in the heart.” (3)

Like the central girder of a house, the heart holds the aspects of the body together. *“It is also the seat of the excellent ojas and reservoir of consciousness (chitta).”* (4)

Because of this emphasis on the heart as the seat of consciousness, the Ayurvedic classics emphasise that *“One who wants to protect the heart...should avoid particularly the causes of affliction of the mind.”* (5)

Contemporary studies underscore the close relationship between heart disease and negative emotions. *“Negative emotions are associated with increased CHD (chronic heart disease) incidence among otherwise healthy men even when results are controlled for the presence of components of the metabolic syndrome or markers of sympathetic nervous system activity.”* (6)

According to the American Psychiatric association, *“Hostility is a better predictor of coronary heart disease (CHD) in older men than a variety of other sociodemographic and physiological risk factors, including smoking, drinking, high caloric intake and high levels of LDL cholesterol, according to a new study published in Health Psychology (Vol. 21, No. 6).”*

Another study published in the Archives of Internal Medicine, demonstrated that marital dissatisfaction tripled a woman's chances of having metabolic syndrome. A study by

Prof. Tim Smith at the University of Utah recently indicated that hostility during marital disputes could increase hardening of the arteries in women's hearts, while controlling behaviour during marital disputes did the same for men's hearts. Warm, intimate and supportive relationships are as important for heart health as a good diet.

Changes in complexion, breathlessness, confusion and lack of appetite are symptoms that may indicate *hrid rog* or heart disease. *Vata* symptoms of heart disease include palpitations and arrhythmia, *pitta* symptoms are angina— a pain often confused with heartburn— and a yellowish colouration caused when the liver is congested by heart failure. Indications of *kapha* heart disease include drowsiness, cough and a heavy sensation in the heart. (7)

Ayurvedic *chikitsa* for CHD and metabolic syndrome involves a multi-faceted approach. After determining the main *dosha*(s) involved by history taking and pulse diagnosis, the practitioner will need to address *ama* and *agni*, pacify the involved *doshas*, initiate appropriate diet and lifestyle changes, address emotional issues and recommend specific herbs for heart health.

Simple methods such as ginger tea in the morning will be helpful for burning *ama* and increasing *agni*— fresh ginger is best for *vata* and *pitta* and dry ginger for *kapha*. The Ayurvedic spice cinnamon has been shown to enhance the activity of insulin (8, 9), improve blood lipids, (10) and provide valuable anti-oxidants to help prevent CHD. (11) Thus for the individual with *kapha* syndrome, a morning tea of dry ginger and organic cinnamon is ideal.

For *vata* provoked individual with hypertension and CHD, Ashwagandha and Dashamoola are good choices to pacify *vata*, alleviate stress and lower blood pressure, while Brahmi will regulate heart rate. Amlaki is ideal to pacify *pitta*, since it is an excellent antioxidant and has been shown to lower cholesterol and reverse arterial plaque formation. (12) As long as the blood sugar is not significantly elevated, one can also use Chyavanprash, which has all the benefits of Amlaki and additionally improves lung function in situations where breathlessness is a symptom, as well as enhancing metabolism. Punarnava is the best choice to pacify *kapha* and eliminate retained fluid in mild heart failure. It is also an important heart tonic. In addition, for metabolic syndrome, Neem and Turmeric will both lower blood glucose and reverse the prothrombotic state. For raised cholesterol, Triphala or Triphala Guggulu are ideal *kapha* pacifying choices.

Diet and lifestyle changes are essential in the management of CHD. Diet should be appropriate for the *doshic* involvement, with emphasis on reducing intake of fried food, eliminating trans-fats, lowering salt intake and increasing the consumption of legumes, vegetables and doshically appropriate berries and fruits. Food combining will be highly

beneficial in improving agni and preventing further *ama* build up. A good exercise plan is essential. While regular exercise is extremely beneficial for CHD and metabolic syndrome; irregular excessive exercise can precipitate a heart attack. As a junior doctor on the wards, I admitted several *pitta* men under forty who had a heart attack at the eighteenth hole while golfing after a sedentary week. Cigarette smoking of course should be eliminated as it is a well known cause of heart and arterial disease. A hard-driving, overworked, *pittagenic* lifestyle must be modified by the use of yoga, *shivasana* and meditation to introduce an emphasis on being rather than doing. The business lunch—still worse, the business dinner— is a significant culprit in precipitating heart attacks because of the combination of excess consumption of heavy food with stressful negotiations. Selecting restaurants with lighter choices such as salads or stir-fried vegetables could add years to the susceptible businessman or businesswoman's life.

A holistic approach to CHD requires that we address the issue of negative emotions, helping clients find skilful means to foster positive emotions and healthy relationships and change habitual patterns of dwelling on negative emotions such as hostility. Practices for cultivating loving kindness are particularly beneficial in this regard. In addition to these practices, Brahmi, Bacopa and Tulsi are useful in reducing ingrained patterns of stress and anxiety and helping build the capacity for *sattvic*, positive states of mind.

Heart-specific herbs are a most valuable addition to the individual's programme. Of these the most outstanding is Arjun (*terminalia arjuna*). Arjuna is possessed of astringent and bitter *rasa*, cooling *virya* and pungent *vipak*. It is especially beneficial for *pitta* and *kapha*. A number of active components have been identified in Arjun, including Tannins, Triterpenoid saponins (arjunic acid, arjunolic acid, arjungenin, arjunglycosides), Flavonoids (arjunone, arjunolone, luteolin), Gallic acid, Oligomeric proanthocyanidins (OPCs) and Phytosterols (b-sitosterol). Arjuna is cardioprotective (13), strengthens heart muscle and has been shown to lower cholesterol significantly.

"To evaluate the antioxidant and hypocholesterolaemic effects of Terminalia arjuna tree bark (a popular cardiotonic substance in Indian pharmacopoeia) and to compare it with a known antioxidant, vitamin E, we performed a randomized controlled trial. Terminalia arjuna tree bark powder had significant antioxidant action that is comparable to vitamin E. In addition, it also has a significant hypocholesterolaemic effect." (14)

Arjun is more effective in angina than nitroglycerin, the standard medicine (15). In addition, Arjuna has diuretic properties that help reduce hypertension and are beneficial in congestive cardiac failure. Arjuna even has antibiotic capabilities valuable in Subacute Bacterial Endocarditis. Named for Shri Krishna's best friend, Arjuna is a mighty and well armed warrior able to combat all aspects of *hrid rog*. Arjuna is best used in combination with supportive herbs that supply additional effectiveness in lowering cholesterol,

strengthening heart muscle and reducing blood stickiness, such as Punarnava, Amlaki, Triphala and Guggulu.

Arjuna the mighty warrior and his companion herbs provide great help in incipient and chronic heart disease. Genuine well being requires the combination of proper diet, exercise and lifestyle regimens along with these powerful herbs, for Ayurveda is never simply a matter of pill popping. With the help of herbal allies such as Arjuna, it may be possible to avoid reliance on toxic medications to control cholesterol, blood pressure and angina.

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