Herbal Help for Prostate Health

September's Prostate Cancer Awareness Month has passed, but it's no reason to slack on maintaining health, especially when you can turn to herbs, says Rachel Nowakowski.

Prostate health and the prevention of prostate disease should be a health concern of all men. After all, prostatitis, an acute or chronic inflammation of the prostate, affects 35 percent of men over 50. More than 50 percent of men over the age of 60 have symptoms of prostate hyperplasia (BPH), a non-cancerous enlargement of the prostate that restricts the flow of urine from the bladder. And, prostate cancer is the most common cancer in men, second only to lung cancer in terms of deaths.

Chinese medicine has been used for the treatment of prostate conditions for thousands of years. The modality categorizes prostate conditions into several different patterns and has different treatments for each. For example, one common pattern seen in patients with a prostate condition is Liver meridian stagnation, which affects the genitalia. This leads to obstruction in the flow of qi—the body's energy flow—and congestion in the prostate area. Symptoms include difficulty urination, pain in the genitals, irritability and depression. Another commonly seen pattern is Damp Heat, symptoms of which include dark or turbid urine, urinary tract infections and a burning sensation with urination. Damp Heat can be caused by a diet high in fatty, fried foods, sugar and dairy products. Damp Heat is often associated with kidney energy weakness. Kidney qi can become deficient due to the normal aging process, overworking or excessive sexual activity. Symptoms include dribbling or incontinence of urine, frequent urination (especially at night), general lethargy and lower back pain.

Chinese Herbal Medicine

Chinese herbal medicine differs from many other treatment modalities in that each patient is assessed individually, with consideration for their present condition and their constitutional strengths and weaknesses. Patients with the same condition may receive different herbal treatments based on their individual signs, symptoms and constitution.

Chinese herbs can be used with prostate conditions to soothe the urinary tract, ease difficult urination and relieve inflammation, but they must be chosen based on the patient, rather than as a formula based on the disease name. Some common herbs include cornsilk (yu mi xiu) and aduki bean (chi xiao dou), both of which can clear heat and ease difficult urination. Talcum (hua shi) drains Damp Heat and relieves hot, painful urination.

Western Supplements and Herbs

Lycopene, a powerful antioxidant found in tomatoes, has been shown to have positive effects on the prostate. Researchers have found that a high level of lycopene in the blood is associated with low PSA (prostate specific antigen) levels. A dosage of 50 mg daily is recommended.

Pygeum africanum is an evergreen tree found in central and southern Africa. Pygeum bark extracts contain compounds found to be helpful in prostate health. Pygeum extracts have been used for more than 30 years in France, Germany and Austria to treat prostate enlargement.

Saw palmetto, vitamins B6 and E, amino acids, and omega-3 fish oil supplements are also all recommended for prostate health by the Center for Holistic Urology at Columbia University Medical Center.

Chinese Dietary Recommendations

In addition to supplementing your regular diet with herbs and vitamins, some dietary changes may also be beneficial for overall prostate health:

Avoid high amounts of animal protein, sugar, peanuts and peanut butter, wheat, caffeine and alcohol to reduce qi stagnation and heat accumulation.

Avoid dairy products to prevent the accumulation of dampness.

Eliminate spicy foods, which can irritate the prostate.

Eat plenty of antioxidant-rich organic fruits and vegetables. Particularly important are cruciferous vegetables such as arugula, cauliflower, cabbage, turnip greens, rutabaga, turnips and kale.

Fermented soy foods (tempeh and miso), long known for their health benefits and isoflavone content, are an important part of the diet.

Grains, fish, organ meats and Brazil nuts are high in selenium, which has positive effects on the prostate.

Other Recommendations

Drink when you are thirsty. The "eight glasses a day" rule is not appropriate for some people. Chinese medicine stresses that drinking too much fluid can result in qi deficiency and dampness. Keep hydrated without forcing yourself to drink excessively. If you wake frequently in the night to urinate, limit your fluid intake later in the day.

Avoid sitting for long periods. If you must take long car rides, stop every two hours to empty your bladder and take a short walk. Getting up will help alleviate pressure on the prostate from sitting.

Relax. Take up tai chi, qi gong, yoga, or other stress reduction methods. Regular exercise helps promote qi circulation.

Conserve your essence. The essence is the material basis for life and controls the aging process. Chinese medicine believes that a man's essence is in the semen. As you age, the frequency of ejaculation should decrease to conserve essence—for men in their 50s, recommendations are for once per week; men in their 60s, once every two weeks.

Sources: Dr. Katz's Guide to Prostate Health: From Conventional to Holistic Therapies by Aaron E. Katz, M.D.; A Handbook of Urology and Male Sexual Dysfunction by Anna Lin; www.drscatalina.com

Note from the medical editor: Because symptoms of benign prostatic enlargement and prostate cancer tend to occur at the same age and may both occur in the same person at the same time, a medical evaluation including a physical exam and proper diagnosis is needed for any person experiencing symptoms associated with the prostate.

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