



## Natural ways to beat stroke

The prospect of stroke is terrifying. It strikes without warning and seemingly at random. Doctors underscore this by referring to stroke as a 'cerebrovascular accident.' Victims have partial, and sometimes total, loss of brain function, which can last for many days or lead to death.

Although medicine provides nothing much besides aspirin and blood-thinning drugs, alternative medicine can offer genuine options, both to prevent stroke and rehabilitate a stroke victim.

### Prevention

◆ **Nutritional therapy.** Maintaining high levels of certain antioxidants and essential fatty acids can prevent stroke. In a trial that involved nearly 30,000 Chinese, supplementation with a combination of vitamin A, vitamin E, and selenium was associated with a substantially lower incidence of stroke over the five years of the study (*Epidemiology*, 1998; 9: 15).

In a trial that involved some 11,000 Italian patients who had survived a recent heart attack, patients were given supplements of omega-3 essential fatty acids. After the supplements had been given, cardiovascular deaths, including stroke, significantly declined (*Lancet*, 1999; 354: 447-55).

◆ **Naturopathic diets.** High consumption of fruits and vegetables is vital in preventing stroke. A cohort of 11,000 people who adopted standard naturopathic principles was monitored and followed up for 17 years. The vegetarians among them, who naturally consume higher quantities of plant foods, had a lower death rate from stroke and other cardiovascular causes than those who were on non-vegetarian diets (*Br Med J*, 1996; 313: 775-9).

In a well-publicized study of 832 healthy men, every increase in fruit and vegetable intake was associated with a significant decrease in the future risk of stroke (*JAMA*, 1995, 273; 1113-17).

A trial of 459 adults with high blood pressure found that increasing the intake of vegetables and fruits lowered blood pressure. Even better results were obtained in those who consumed diets that were also low in fats (*New Engl J Med*, 1997; 336: 1117-12). Nevertheless, the study didn't differentiate between different types of fats, such as trans fats used in processed foodstuffs.

The greatest benefit of a diet high in plant foods may be a high dietary intake of vitamin C, which has been found essential in preventing stroke. In a systematic review of studies that involved more than 110,000 people, those with the highest intake of vitamin C (or biological markers of vitamin C intake) suffered the fewest deaths from stroke (*J Cardiovascular Risk*, 1996; 3: 513-21).

Interestingly, an epidemiological retrospective study over 30 years recorded a higher incidence of stroke in men who had the highest reported fish consumption,

suggesting there can be too much of a good thing (*Stroke*, 1996; 27: 204-9).

◆ **Transcendental meditation.** Besides dietary intervention, meditative practices that promote relaxation have also proved beneficial. An ingenious trial examined the effect of meditation on the main arteries to the brain. In the trial, 138 African Americans with high blood pressure and at risk of stroke were randomized to learn either transcendental meditation or conventional health education. The researchers discovered a reduction in the thickness of the lining of the carotid arteries in those who meditated for at least six to nine months compared with the health-educated controls (*Stroke*, 2000; 31: 568-73).

◆ **Herbs.** Of all kinds of phytotherapy, extract of garlic works best, even among those at high risk of stroke. One placebo-controlled trial examined the effect of powdered garlic (*Allium sativum*) on 60 adolescents with increased platelet aggregation (tendency to clot), who were at risk of stroke. The teenagers were given 800 mg of powdered garlic every day for four weeks. Measurements after the study showed that the garlic produced a decrease in their blood platelets' tendency to clot. However, in individuals at high risk, taking garlic must be a lifetime strategy. In the study, as soon as the therapy was stopped, platelet counts reverted to the previous readings (*Eur J Clin Pharmacol*, 1993; 45: 333-6).

### Rehabilitative therapy

◆ **Music therapy.** Empirical evidence of long standing shows that music with a strong rhythmic pulse, set to match a stroke victim's gait tempo, can improve rehabilitation. In laboratory studies, electromyographic measurements of the gastrocnemius (the superficial rear calf muscle) have also registered improvements after exposure to music (*Crit Rev Med Rehabil*, 1997; 9: 205-17).

◆ **Acupuncture.** In a review of nine randomized, controlled clinical trials involving 538 stroke victims, six were judged to show acupuncture's worth and its superiority to conventional therapies like hydrotherapy (*J Neurol*, 2002; 249: 272-80).

◆ **Phytotherapy.** In a placebo-controlled clinical trial that involved 50 patients who were brain-impaired after surgery for subarachnoid haemorrhage, *Ginkgo biloba* (the Maidenhair tree) taken at a daily dose of 150 mg for 12 weeks brought about significant improvements in attention, short-term memory and reaction time (*Muenchener Med Wochenschrift*, 1991; 133 (Suppl 1): S34-S37).

The most profound effects occur when the herb is given intravenously. In another study, *Ginkgo biloba* was given to 20 patients in acute stroke intravenously. Of these patients, 10 recovered completely, or almost so, with no adverse effects recorded (*Wiener Therapiewoche*, 1994, 44: 1394-6).

**Harald Gaier**

*Harald Gaier, a registered naturopath, osteopath, homoeopath and herbalist, practises at The Health Equation and The Irish Centre of Integrated Medicine, Co. Kildare. (www.drgaier.com).*