

A Natural Approach To Pain Control

by Kevin Jackson, BSc, ND

The most common presenting symptom by a patient to her/his physician - is pain. Pain is an important symptom indicating tissue damage or other problems within the body. It involves transmission signals from the damaged area along specialized nerve fibers in the spinal cord to the brain where pain is actually "experienced". Pain can be a life saving event (for example when one touches something very hot, reflexes to pain stimulate quick removal of the affected body part) or an ongoing soul destroying affliction (such as in chronic pain states).

Regardless of the type of pain experienced, the most important treating principle is finding and eliminating the cause. In situations involving acute pain, such as in wounds, infections or post operative conditions, eliminating pathogens and speeding the healing process are usually the best approaches to pain reduction. Zinc has been studied extensively for its ability to enhance wound healing, speed recovery time and reduce the incidence of post-operative complications such as infection. By decreasing recovery time zinc indirectly reduces the amount of pain experienced. In some studies, hospital stays have been reduced by more than one half with the use of zinc.

Vitamin E has a similar effect to zinc in speeding recovery from injuries and can be used both topically and internally. Studies have shown that both headache pain and neurological pain from shingles can be reduced with the use of vitamin E. This vitamin has also been shown to be effective in the treatment of menstrual pain and cramping.

In migraines headaches, food allergies or sensitivities often play an important role as triggers and must be eliminated through rotation or elimination diets. In muscle pain caused by spasm, a deficiency of calcium and/or magnesium is often the cause. Conditions such as osteoarthritis can result in severe joint pain due to an erosion of joint cartilage and subsequent damage to bone. Glucosamine sulfate has been shown in studies to reduce joint pain by rebuilding joint cartilage and increasing the cushioning effect in the joint space.

Chronic pain is often more difficult to treat as it is usually due to an underlying disease state or severe structural damage. Chronic and degenerative disease states can almost always be helped by dietary changes. For example, both sugar and animal products (other than fish) have been shown to worsen inflammatory states in the body. Increased inflammation usually means increased pain. In animal experiments, coffee

has been shown to block opiate receptors in the brain which are part of the body's natural pain control mechanism. Based on this information it makes sense for chronic pain sufferers to eliminate coffee, sugar and animal products from their diet. Fish on the other hand, (such as mackerel, sardines, salmon, herring and haddock) contain an omega-3 fatty acid that actually counteracts the

inflammatory process thus reducing pain. Eating fish 3 to 4 times weekly can reduce pain by blocking the formation of inflammatory products much the way aspirin does. Other substances that help block this pathway and potentially reduce pain are evening primrose oil, the bioflavonoid quercetin and ginger.

Wintergreen oil is formed from the steam distillation of *Gaultheria procumbens*. When rubbed into the skin over a painful area, it has been shown to have well documented anti-inflammatory and analgesic (pain-killing) properties. It is particularly effective in treating muscular pain.

Acupuncture has been used for centuries to treat pain disorders. A review article of 24 studies found that the typical clinical trial showed a 70 percent efficacy when compared to placebo treatments.

The use of TENS (transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation) has also been shown to control pain. Electrode pads are placed over the painful site and a mild electric current stimulates skin nerves in the area. This stimulation competes with pain impulses to the brain, thus diminishing the sensation of pain.

Regardless of the approach taken to controlling pain, results will be more effective when the cause is addressed. In situations where the cause cannot be identified palliation may be necessary.