

Nature's Field

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Ho Shou Wu *Polygonum multiflorum*

By Steven H. Horne

Ho shou wu (also known as fo-ti, ho shou wu, he shou wu, flowery knotweed, and fleecflower) is a major Chinese tonic herb. In Chinese medicine it nourishes the “yin” energy of both of the liver and kidney energy systems. To understand what this means, it helps to understand a little about Chinese philosophy.

In Chinese medicine, the kidney is the home of the “jing” or basic life energy you were born with. The kidney energy also maintains the “bones” or structural integrity of the body. So, in strengthening the kidney energy, ho shou wu strengthens the body structure and nourishes the vital essence, or basic life energy. For instance, it helps relieve backache, a common symptom of a deficiency of kidney energy.

Since the Chinese liver energy “builds the blood,” it is also a tonic for the blood. Research suggests that ho shou wu has some specific circulatory-enhancing properties. Studies have confirmed the plant has the ability to reduce hypertension and blood cholesterol. In addition to directly inhibiting cholesterol, it also decreases cholesterol absorption in the digestive tract. In one study in China, over 80% of high cholesterol patients showed improvement when taking a decoction of the root. An animal study done in 2000 suggested it had a heart-protecting antioxidant effect.

Ho shou wu has a bitter, sweet flavor with an astringent nature. Energetically, it is a warming herb, used as a tonic for rebuilding weakened conditions. The botanical name



Photo by Stephen Foster

for ho shou wu is *Polygonum multiflorum*. The Polygonum genus contains a number of useful medicinal plants, including the Western herb bistort (*Polygonum bistorta*). All of these plants contain tannins, which make them astringent, so they tone tissues and arrest discharges.

What makes ho shou wu interesting is that it also contains a small amount of anthraquinones, the same laxative compounds found in cascara sagrada and senna. This gives the herb a mild laxative effect. The combination of a stimulant laxative action and an astringent action makes ho shou wu useful for a variety of gastrointestinal problems. In India, it is used for colic and enteritis; in Brazil, it is used for hemorrhoids; in China for ulcerations. The Western herb yellow dock also combines this astringent and laxative action.

Ho shou wu has some infection fighting qualities. It has been found useful for tuberculosis, malaria, and some types of viral infections. There is also some evidence that ho shou wu can help increase sugar levels in the blood, making it useful for hypoglycemia.

Considering the overall properties of this plant, it is obvious why it would earn the reputation as an anti-aging herb. Its ability to aid the cardiovascular system alone makes it a useful tonic to counteract some of the effects of aging.

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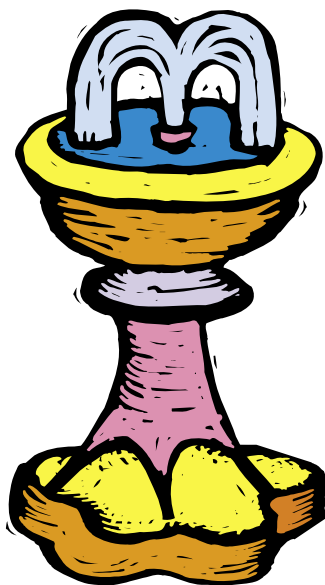
The Chinese cook ho shou wu in a black bean sauce and then dry it, which turns it into a superior tonic. This means the herb is food-like and has a long-term beneficial effect in strengthening the body.

Traditional Chinese medicine uses ho shou wu to treat premature aging, weakness, vaginal discharges, numerous infectious diseases, angina pectoris, premature hair loss, graying of the hair, intestinal gas, bleeding, malaria, infertility and impotence. The herb is contraindicated in Chinese medicine with stomach and spleen qi (chi) deficiency and accumulation of phlegm. In other words, don't use it if you have mucus congestion and weak digestion.

The Chinese common name comes from the name of a famous herbalist whose infertility was supposedly cured by the herb. His grey hair was also restored to its black color after taking the herb and he was able to live a long life and

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retain his black hair. So, Ho Shou Wu literally means Mr. Ho's hair is black (shou = head, wu = black). Although there isn't a lot of scientific data to support this claim, there is folk evidence for it, and clinical trials of various formulas containing ho shou wu in China suggest it may be useful in treating alopecia or hair loss.

According to Chinese medicine, the health of the hair is governed by the kidneys and "liver blood." The kidneys are also thought to govern the bone marrow, and the health of the teeth is connected to the quality of the bone marrow. So, ho shou wu may help us hold onto both our hair and our teeth as we age.

Besides being available as a single, ho shou wu is also found in the Chinese formulas Blood Build and KB-C, which respectively "build the blood" and strengthen the kidney qi. Ho shou wu is a gentle, tonic herb that must be taken regularly over a period of many months to have optimal effects. It is very safe and can be consumed in doses up to 5 grams per day (about 8 capsules). Recommended dose is 2-4 capsules twice daily.

Selected References

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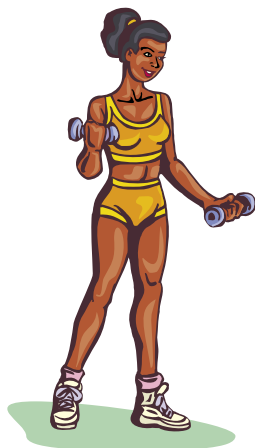
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Don't Forget to Take Your Tonics!

by Steven H. Horne, RH (AHG)

With thousands of herbs, minerals and animal parts in their materia medica, the Chinese have plenty of medicines that can be used to treat disease symptoms, just like we do in the West. They have herbs that will kill pain, “knock you out” when you can't sleep and so forth. However, the Chinese consider using medicines in this manner to be “inferior” medicine.

“Superior” medicine, on the other hand, is nourishing medicine that gradually rebuilds the body and removes underlying causes of disease. It's not that symptomatic treatment isn't needed sometimes to give the suffering individual some temporary relief or to stabilize a serious situation; it's just that this isn't really restoring the body to health.

The disease-treatment approach that many Western people take to nutritional supplements, herbs, diet, etc. is part of the reason they are dissatisfied sometimes with the results they get with natural healing. They are expecting rapid, symptomatic relief like they get with Western drugs and most herbs and supplements just can't deliver this kind of rapid, symptomatic relief (at least not the ones that are safe and legal for lay people to use).

On the other hand, modern Western medicine is totally blind to the idea of a tonic. As Edward Shook said in his *Advanced Treatise in Herbology*, “Allopathic physicians use countless poisonous herbs, and ignore the most virtuous and harmless ones.” These gentle, non-toxic remedies aren't going to make your symptoms go away overnight, but they can gradually restore your body to health, and even help you stay healthy.

Many of these superior or tonic herbs must be taken in fairly large doses over a longer period of time because they have a gradual cumulative effect. They are more “food-like” than “medicine-like.” In this article, I will discuss what tonic herbs are, how they help counteract the effects of aging and briefly describe major tonic herbs from around the world.

What is a Tonic?

Of all the terms used in herbal medicine, the term tonic is one of the most vague. Even professional herbalists don't totally agree on a definition, but to my mind, a tonic is any herb that “tones” the structure or function of the body. In other words, tonics make the body more structurally sound and improve the general function of the various organs of the body.

Herbs that have been traditionally considered tonics generally do some combination of the following:

- Enhance immune function
- Boost energy levels
- Improve glandular function
- Improve organ function
- Counteract the effects of aging
- Reduce stress or have adaptogenic effects
- Enhance lean muscle mass and reduce fat
- Improve flexibility and structural integrity

In short, tonics help to restore normal function and tissue integrity to weakened systems and organs. That brings us to an interesting question—*Can prescription drugs or over-the-counter medications perform these functions?* I don't think so. While drugs can duplicate many other actions of medicinal herbs, it is an herb's ability to tonify or rebuild the body that make them “superior” medicine to the symptom-treating, “inferior” medicine of modern drugs.

Tonics are generally used under two conditions. First, they are used to help rebuild people who are weak, fatigued or depleted. This can often happen after a long period of stress or physical illness.

Second, tonics are also taken by people as they get older to slow the effects of aging and keep the body healthy into old age. They typically allow older people to continue to have good energy, a healthy sex drive and a stronger resistance to disease.

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Tonics are great remedies, but they do have some contraindications. Most tonics are generally not used for treating acute, inflammatory diseases (although there are a few exceptions). Many are not suitable for children, teenagers and young adults. This is because they tend to overstimulate reproductive and other hormones in young people (who don't need this extra stimulation). The exception here is if a young person is in a depleted condition from chronic illness, in which case these herbs would be fine.

Tonics and Aging

There are many researchers right now who are studying the effects of aging on the body. They are finding certain key factors that are involved in the decline of health, vitality and immune function as we age. These factors include the following:

- Increased resistance to insulin and decreased glucose tolerance (which leads to diabetes).
- Increased body fat and altered lipid ratios
- Increased systolic blood pressure
- Decreased aerobic capacity (ability of the body to oxygenate tissues)
- Decreased strength and muscle mass
- Hormonal imbalances and reduced hormone output
- Reduced immune function

Essentially, what this means is that if we want to keep feeling young, energetic and healthy, we need to find ways to accomplish the following anti-aging goals:

- Decrease insulin resistance
- Decrease blood pressure
- Reduce body fat and increase muscle mass
- Improve immune function
- Improve hormonal function
- Increase tissue oxygenation

While researchers are searching for ways to achieve these anti-aging effects, there is an answer “sitting right under their noses”— traditional tonic herbs. All over the world, different cultures have herbs that have been traditionally given to the elderly to keep them healthy. As I was assembling the information for this topic, I was impressed with how these herbs help with most of these anti-aging goals.

For instance, go back and re-read the cover article on the tonic herb, ho shou wu, and see how many of these anti-aging goals ho shou wu supports. Also, as you read about the herbs that follow, take note of the many anti-aging benefits each herb possesses.

Korean Ginseng

In China, panax ginseng (also called Korean ginseng) is considered the “king of tonics” and is taken daily by millions of older Chinese people to ward off the effects of aging. When I recently visited the Chinese herb shop in Chinatown in Las Vegas, I noticed that there was more ginseng there than any other type of herb. In addition to many packaged ginseng products, they had three barrels with three different sizes of ginseng roots as well as numerous prepared ginseng products.

Ginseng is definitely an anti-aging herb. It is known to increase energy, stamina and endurance. It improves mental and physical performance, including memory and reaction time. It decreases insulin resistance and balances blood sugar to counteract hypoglycemia and diabetes. It also helps reduce anxiety due to stress and relieves depression. Ginseng is beneficial for the cardiovascular system, too. It lowers cholesterol, aids blood circulation to the heart and has a beneficial effect on congestive heart failure.

While we think of ginseng as a “male” herb in the West, it is equally beneficial for men and women. For instance, it can help with many of the symptoms of menopause, including vaginal atrophy.

Wild American Ginseng

Native Americans prized American ginseng for many of the same reasons Asians prized panax ginseng. It has the same stress-reducing and energy-enhancing effects, but is not as warming as its Oriental cousin. Native Americans often used ginseng with elderly people who were suffering from digestive problems and low energy.

Phyllis Light, a professional herbalist from Alabama, told me that chewing on a small piece of American ginseng root everyday was a great way for senior citizens to stay healthy. Most American ginseng is cultivated now and the cultivated varieties are heavily sprayed. NSP is fortunate to have the wildcrafted ginseng, an expensive, but highly valuable herb. In the Chinese herb shop I mentioned earlier, the wild American ginseng was behind the counter and commanded a premium price.

Fortunately, you don't need much to get the benefits. Just one capsule per day, taken in the morning, is all you need.

Eleuthero root

Eleuthero root (formerly known as Siberian ginseng because of its tonic effects) has been prized in Russia for its adaptagenic effects and is taken by many classes of people from office workers to athletes. It has been shown to increase immunity, and enhance stamina and endurance. It reduces stress hormone output, improves mental concentration and athletic performance and helps balance blood sugar levels.

Eleuthero contains antioxidant compounds, anticancer compounds, immune enhancing compounds and cholesterol-lowering compounds. It is used in Chinese medicine for inflammation of the bronchials, reduced sex drive and function, weakness in the lower limbs and insomnia.

Eleuthero may have a testosterone-like effect. A midwife friend of mine, Joan Patton, said that eleuthero would stop labor if a woman was going into labor prematurely in the third trimester. I haven't read documentation on that elsewhere, but I have no reason to doubt her experience.

Dr. Bruce Halstead, a medical doctor and research scientist, told me that in the early days of space exploration, our astronauts were suffering from severe space sickness, but the cosmonauts were not. Because he had contacts in Russia, he was asked to find out the cosmonaut's secret. It was eleuthero root. He said our astronauts started taking eleuthero to prevent space sickness.

Unlike Korean and American ginseng, eleuthero is safe for younger people to use. It is an excellent herb for anyone who feels like they are under too much stress.

Dong Quai

Dong quai is the Chinese "queen of tonics." Again, we tend to think of it as a female herb in the west, but this simply isn't the case. Although the herb is used by over 500 million women in China alone to maintain health, it has beneficial effects for both men and women.

In Chinese medicine, dong quai affects the heart, liver and spleen energy. This means it enhances blood circulation, builds or nourishes the blood and improves digestion. In addition to having a beneficial effect on women's menstrual cycles, the herb can aid high blood pressure, atherosclerosis, asthma, bronchitis and anemia. It can also be helpful for

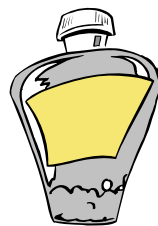
arthritis, constipation and heart arrhythmia. It is especially beneficial for people who are cold, fatigued, pale, weak and anemic.

Dong quai should be avoided during pregnancy, diarrhea or with hot or feverish conditions. It should also be avoided by women with endometriosis and breast cancer.

Astragalus

Another important tonic herb that comes to us from China is astragalus. This herb is sort of the "poor man's ginseng." It actually provides many of the benefits of ginseng, but is a milder, food-like herb that can be taken in larger quantities and on a more regular basis. And, unlike ginseng, it is suitable for the young as well as the old.

I made a syrup of astragalus by simmering pieces of the root in a mixture of equal parts honey and purified water. Not only was the resulting syrup pleasant tasting, but the left-over pieces of honey-soaked astragalus were delicious.



I understand the Chinese will often cook the herb with rice or make broths or soups with it.

Astragalus affects the Chinese spleen and lung, so it enhances digestion and assimilation and increases immunity. It

replenishes qi (energy), helps the body release toxins, "warms" the system and reduces water retention. Astragalus also has adaptagenic and antioxidant activity.

Astragalus has been traditionally used for conditions such as lack of appetite, fatigue, diarrhea, frequent colds, shortness of breath, chronic sores and ulcerations, weakness, weak constitution and heart palpitations. It has been used to treat scanty urination, abscess, arthritic pain and numbness, asthma, boils, edema, inflammation, loss of appetite, muscle numbness, nephritis, nervousness, prolapsed organs, recovery from severe blood loss and uterine bleeding.

The best use of astragalus is for prevention of disease. Chinese families cook with it during cold and flu season to prevent illness. It is a great tonic for children and pleasant tasting, so they will take it in liquid form or in food. Although it is mildly warming, it can also be used for acute colds and flu. However, it is not suitable for conditions of excess yang (heat and dryness) or yin deficiency (heat, dryness and thirst).

Ginseng is the "King of Tonics" and Dong Quai is the "Queen of Tonics" in Chinese medicine.

Cordyceps

Here's another tonic herb from China, although it's not really an herb; it's a fungus that grows on caterpillars. Research is showing that cordyceps can help enhance energy, sex drive and athletic performance. In Chinese medicine, it is a tonic to both the yin and the yang energy.

It affects the Chinese kidney and lung systems. Kim Balas uses it a lot for chronic weakness of the lungs. She finds it helpful for asthma and other chronic respiratory diseases.

Since "metal" or "lung" weakness is one of my biggest problems, I've started using Cordyceps along with Chinese Lung Support as a tonic for my respiratory system recently and have noticed big improvements in respiratory function and my overall energy level. Studies have demonstrated that it is a great remedy for improving stamina and endurance in athletes.

Cordyceps helps balance blood sugar and has cardiovascular benefits, it reduced stress-induced cholesterol and blood pressure in a study using rats. It can help elderly persons with problems like fatigue, dizziness, cold intolerance, tinnitus, frequent nighttime urination, low libido and memory loss. Cordyceps is also an antioxidant and free radical scavenger. It helps to reduce chronic inflammation and balance blood sugar levels.

Another benefit of cordyceps is its ability to enhance immune function. It can enhance the effectiveness of chemotherapy and may have antitumor activity. It also prevents cirrhosis of the liver and may be beneficial for hepatitis B. It works well in combination with ganoderma or reishi mushrooms for enhancing immunity.

Maca

We're not finished with our tonic herbs from China, but I think it's about time we gave some other countries a chance. So, let's look at maca, a South American tonic that has a strong reputation as a sexual tonic. It is fed to animals to increase fertility and is used by human beings to stay virile.

Maca is also an adaptagen and is reported to improve mental concentration. Although we don't know a lot about its specific actions, it is likely it supports other anti-aging goals as well.

Suma

And while we're in South America, we should mention Suma, a tonic herb that has been called Brazilian ginseng.

(All the ginseng wanna-be's try to be associated with that old "king of tonics" don't they?)

Suma has anti-inflammatory properties and accelerates wound healing. It lowers blood sugar levels, reduces cholesterol and blood pressure and increases resistance to stress.

Ginkgo

Turning to Europe, we have ginkgo. (Okay, technically, ginkgo is a Chinese herb, too, but the Chinese didn't discover the benefits of the leaf—the Europeans did.) Ginkgo is a hardy, long-lived tree, a living fossil because its reproductive system is the same as the evergreens (pine, spruce, etc.) but it is deciduous. It is thought to be the most ancient deciduous tree on the planet.

Europeans discovered that an extract of the flavonoids in the leaves was highly beneficial to the circulatory system and has other anti-aging benefits. Ginkgo extract enhances circulation to the brain to improve memory and concentration. It even helps to stabilize Alzheimer's disease and dementia. Studies show that ginkgo improves alpha-wave activity in the brain.

Ginkgo is also an anti-oxidant that protects the brain and slows macular degeneration. It improves peripheral circulation, reduces asthma symptoms and can help relieve tinnitus.

Gotu Kola

Ayurvedic medicine from India has a couple of good tonics, too. First, there's gotu kola. I first learned about gotu kola as a memory enhancing herb. The story I was told is that elephants eat it and we all know "an elephant never forgets." Now, whether that's actually true or not, it is a good way to remember some of the properties of gotu kola.

With regular use, gotu kola enhances central nervous system function and improves cognitive function and memory. It won't help young people that already have good memories, but it can help stop or partially reverse memory decline as people age. I used it with an elderly uncle of mine and it was very helpful.

However, gotu kola is far more than a memory herb. It is anti-inflammatory and helps liver ailments like jaundice and cirrhosis of the liver. It decreases fatigue and depression and is used to treat chronic skin conditions. NSP used to have a formula containing eleuthero root, gotu kola and capsicum (GGC). Daniel Mowrey did some research on this combination and found it increased endurance in laboratory animals. I found it a useful energy tonic for me, too.

Ashwaganda

Our second East Indian tonic is ashwaganda, which has been called (can you guess it?) Indian ginseng. This is another calming adaptagen and nervine with immune modulating effects. It is used for depleted, exhausted and underweight people. It has anti-inflammatory properties that make it useful for arthritis and other chronic inflammatory conditions. It builds the blood by enhancing red blood cell counts and hemoglobin levels.

Rhodiola

We'll make one final stop on our world-wide tour of tonic herbs before returning to China to learn about three more Chinese tonics. This is another Russian adaptagen, rhodiola. This one also enhances mental and physical performance and increases blood flow to the muscles and brain. It activates enzymes that break down fat, so it helps to reduce fat and increase muscle tone. It also stimulates immune activity and helps prevent cells from mutating to become cancer cells. Rhodiola is also antidepressant.

Schizandra Fruit

Now we're back to China to talk about one of my favorite tonics, schizandra fruit. This Chinese herb is said to balance the body's energies, quiet the heart and calm the spirit. It helps protect the liver against toxins and is useful for hepatitis. It eases both depression and irritability and improves mental clarity.

This adaptagenic herb is also useful for improving sexual stamina, balancing fluids in the system and fighting respiratory infections. It's the major ingredient in my favorite tonic formula, Nervous Fatigue Formula—a great blend for people who feel “run-down” and “burned-out.”

Lycii Fruit (Wolfberry)

These berries are used in Chinese medicine as a longevity tonic, immune enhancer and sexual tonic. They are also a tonic in Tibetan medicine. Also known as lycium and goji berries, wolfberry improves circulation and has powerful antioxidant effects (which is why it's an ingredient in Thai-Go). One of the richest plants in vitamin C, it helps protect the liver and kidneys and may be useful for tinnitus, blurred eyesight and other vision problems.

I planted one of these in my herb garden this spring and it's grown from one tiny 3" sprout to a small bush about

three feet tall. It started blooming last week, too. So I may be able to harvest some of these and dry them for snacks next year. They are really tasty.

Licorice

Speaking of tasty tonics, here's one that's both a Chinese herb and a Western remedy—licorice. This is another of my favorite herbs. Like so many other tonics, licorice increases stamina and endurance, balances blood sugar levels, counteracts weakness and fatigue, improves digestive function and enhances the immune system. It is anti-inflammatory and helps to keep mucus membranes moist. It is the most widely used herb in Chinese medicine as the Chinese frequently put a little licorice in their herb formulas. It's a very safe tonic for both children and adults, but is contraindicated with high blood pressure.

Gynostemma

Our last tonic (at least the last one we're going to discuss in this article) is a relatively new adaptogen from China. Gynostemma contains nearly four times as many saponins as Panax ginseng (with similar structure and properties). It balances the energy of all the meridians in the body, regulates the immune system, enhances strength and endurance and is anti-inflammatory.

Obviously, it will be more effective to use tonic herbs the way the Chinese do—in combinations. There are several combinations which feature the herbs we've just discussed, including Mineral Chi Tonic, Adaptamax, Nervous Fatigue Formula, Spleen Chi Activator, Suma Combination or Trigger Immune.

Of course, tonics aren't going to do you any good if you don't take them regularly. So, if you want to counteract the effects of aging and keep that youthful, energetic feeling, try taking a tonic for a few months. (Of course, this will be even more effective if you combine it with some of the anti-aging therapies I mentioned last month.

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Kimberly Balas' Clinician's Corner

Colon Transit Time, Calcium in Joints and Niacin for Cholesterol

Colon Transit Time

I've been working on transit time of my digestive system; I find that I feel much better when the colon is empty. Sometimes transit time is delayed by as much as one day and when this happens I feel much worse—very weak. Sometimes my skin starts itching, too.

One of the problems I have continued to have is that if I don't take magnesium oxide my stool is very hard, almost not flushable, and very painful. Magnesium oxide takes care of the stool consistency with no problems. Transit time is non-negotiable at this point. I have been able to adjust it slightly but with no cigars. What I have done so far, is to do a bowel cleanse. This has helped quite a bit, but still the transit time is not correct.

Products I currently use are:

Magnesium Oxide—6 per day.

Cascara Sagrada—I seem to have to use 3 per day.

Probiotic 11—6 per day

I have also tried LBS II—this does not seem to work the same as cascara sagrada, but I seem to need more capsules.

At times it feels like there is some sort of blockage. I am curious if a parasite cleansing would fix this issue. What do you think?

Jeff

It probably does help that you aren't using the cigars!

Taking cascara sagrada regularly can cause the bowel to lose tone over time. Try an enema or colonic instead. Do you have a good colon therapist in your area? I would go that route first.

It sounds like there is a gall bladder link here, too. Taking liquid bitters on your tongue, like liquid Oregon Grape, could be beneficial.

Calcium Build-Up in Joints

Is there a product that can help break up a build-up of calcium in the joints, especially the knees?

Warren

You can figure out if there is calcium build-up in the body by taking the phosphorus number on a person's bloodwork report and multiplying it by 2.5. The result is called the predicted calcium. Next, you take the serum calcium number from the person's bloodwork and subtract the predicted calcium. If the result is over 0.9 then there is an excess of calcium in the body. This will lead to calcification, kidney stones and increased cancer risk.

When there is excess calcium in the system, I use Vitamin B-12, which helps with calcium transport, and HSN-W and essential fatty acids, which help bind the calcium. Calcium usually gets stuck in the liver and you need iron to oxidize it. Hydrangea also helps dissolve calcium deposits.

Niacin and Cholesterol

My daughter just told me her cholesterol is 309 and the doctor wants her to start taking 250 mg of niacin daily and work up to taking 1000 mg. He didn't suggest any other B-vitamins. Is there anything I should suggest in addition to the niacin?

Cindy

This is most likely an inflammatory situation. I would suggest she try the IF Relief and consider the possibility that she might have heavy metals in her system. Studies show that it takes a minimum of 5000 mg. of niacin to alter cholesterol and all this does is suppress production. The cholesterol is there for a reason, which is to protect from the toxins. Find out where the toxins are coming from and work on eliminating them. I would have her increase the amount of good fats in her diet and eliminate all artificial stuff.

Kimberly Balas is a board certified naturopath and clinical nutritionist. She is currently head of the research department and a certified instructor for all Tree of Light courses. She is available for consultations by phone or at her Wyoming office. For more information on scheduling a consult please phone 307-277-2466.

