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Complementary Medicine

A naturopathic approach to managing diabetes

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INTRODUCTION
Naturopathy is a complete medical system with many similar elements to conventional care, including diabetes management, for example diet and lifestyle recommendations to manage weight, blood glucose, lipids and hypertension.

Naturopaths adopt an evidenced-based, preventative, empowerment approach to care delivery and work according to a philosophy most conventional practitioners can relate to.

Philosophy of naturopathic medicine
Naturopaths regard ill health as an imbalance in the mind, body, spiritual and environmental aspects of an individual’s life. Nurturing positivity, responsibility and self-actualisation are important to maintaining good health.

Naturopathic practice is guided by eight principles or cardinal tenets.

1 Vis medicatrix naturae
The healing power of nature or the innate healing potential of all individuals, which was a key philosophy of many ancient healing traditions including Hippocratic traditions. It reflects the resilience of nature and the complex biological and mental processes encompassed in healing. Therapies are selected to support the individual’s innate healing potential or supportive therapy when healing is no longer achievable.

Naturopaths intervene as little as possible when supporting the individual’s healing potential.

2 Primum non nocere
First do no harm, which has several interpretations and is consistent with current quality and safety practices that seek to prevent harm, errors and adverse events.

From a naturopathic perspective it encompasses collaborating with the individual and his or her conventional practitioners and avoiding treatment strategies that do not support self-healing.

3 Tolle causam
Identify and treat the cause.
Signs and symptoms are regarded as indicators of imbalance, but individual factors that contribute to ill health need to be considered. These include genetic, lifestyle, and social factors.

Naturopaths undertake similar investigations to conventional practitioners such as blood and urine tests and measuring blood pressure. They sometimes also undertake other investigations such as mineral analysis and iridology. Factors that contribute to illness vary from individual-to-individual; thus, individualised care is essential.

4 Tolle totum or Corpus totem curare
Treat the whole person, which includes mind, body, spirit considering the socioeconomic situation and the individual’s relationships. Health is influenced by complex interacting factors; that must be balanced to achieve wholeness/health. Imbalance, deficiencies or excesses in one body system initiates compensatory mechanisms that disrupt other systems and produces symptoms; for example hyperglycaemia produces polyuria, thirst and lethargy.

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Managing stressors and supporting the individual's biological self-regulatory mechanisms is important to rebalancing the whole.

5 Prohibere quam sanare
Prevention is the best 'cure'. Identifying risk factors for ill health and developing holistic management plans to reduce such risks that involve making decisions with the individual.

6 Ponos versus pathos
Managing chronic disease is different from managing acute illnesses. Chronic disease is due to accumulated external and internal stressors that disrupt homeostasis. Acute care involves helping the body heal and then managing modifiable factors that could recur. In the context of diabetes, acute illness might be hyperglycaemic or hypoglycaemic events. Watching for the 'healing crisis' or turning point to recover is important in naturopathic care. Chronic disease management is longer term and depends on the type of diabetes the individual has.

7 Docere
Doctor as teacher/educator/leader: Docere reflects the importance of education to health care, especially diabetes management. It also reflects the Latin derivation of the word 'doctor'. Naturopaths have a responsibility to have up-to-date knowledge and give accurate, unbiased information to enable the individual to make informed decisions and/or seek further information about treatment options.

8 Caveat emptor
Health is the responsibility of every individual notwithstanding his or her right to timely optimal health care. Diabetes self-care is part of an individual's responsibility. Self-care is demanding and requires positive support from family and health professionals.

Naturopathic consultation and management
Most naturopathic consultations do not involve acute emergencies such as ketoacidosis or hyperglycaemic hyperosmolar states; naturopaths refer people presenting with these emergencies to an emergency department. Most initial naturopathic consultations take about an hour and encompass the information shown in box 1. An outline of naturopathic diabetes management strategies are shown in table 1. Most management naturopathic treatment strategies are not-toxic or invasive and are probiotic.

Lifestyle advice is part of most consultations and is very similar to current conventional diabetes lifestyle advice: weight management to achieve and maintain a healthy weight through diet and exercise.

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Table 1: Common naturopathic management options that might be used alone or in combination depending on the individual's needs and response to treatment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lower blood glucose and lipids and manage weight</th>
<th>Manage blood pressure</th>
<th>Reduce C-reactive protein and homocysteine</th>
<th>Reduce oxidative stress</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exercise</td>
<td>exercise</td>
<td>Omega 3 oils</td>
<td>COQ10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diet</td>
<td>Stress management</td>
<td>Vitamins C, E (C-reactive protein)</td>
<td>Lipoic acid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low *GI foods</td>
<td></td>
<td>B6 and B12 (Homocysteine)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fibre e.g. oats, yoghurt, gilt, increasing fruit and vegetable intake</td>
<td>Reduce salt intake</td>
<td>Control blood glucose</td>
<td>Niacin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce saturated fats</td>
<td>Fish oils</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herbal medicines e.g. Wormia culciantis, chaga, ginseng extract, Galangella longiflora, Salvia officinalis, Turmeric, Berberis glandulosa, Trigonolla australis, Vaccinium myrtillus</td>
<td>Herbal medicines from the Alkali family</td>
<td>Vitamins C and E</td>
<td>Zinc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplements e.g. chromium, biotin, vanadium</td>
<td>Oats</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coenzyme Q10 (COQ10)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Magnesium</td>
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<td>Herbal medicines e.g. Scutellaria baicalensis, Vaccinium myrtillus, Vitus vinifera</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Glycaemic index
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This is sometimes referred to as Therapeutic Lifestyle Change (TLC). Stress using counseling, exercise, meditation, and, if indicated, medicines such as Codonopsis pilosula and rescue remedy (a flower essence often used as a first aid measure to induce calm) is also a key part of the management plan.

Nutritional deficiencies have long been reported in diabetes, for example zinc, magnesium and vitamin B₁₂. In addition, some conventional medicines contribute to nutritional deficiencies and can add to oxidative stress and tissue damage, for example metformin contributes to vitamin B₁₂ deficiency and Atorvastatin depletes CoQ₁₀.

Diets high in fruit, vegetables and fibre and low in saturated fat and salt and alcohol are advocated to supply key nutrients such as beta carotene (carrots), lycopene (tomatoes). However, supplements are often recommended. While evidence for recommending nutritional supplements is increasing, more definitive research is needed including the optimal time to commence supplementation to reduce oxidative stress.

Naturopaths regard managing stress as very important to preventing type 2 diabetes and reducing physiological damage in people with type 2. Managing mental stress using counseling, exercise, meditation, and, if indicated, medicines such as Codonopsis pilosula and rescue remedy (a flower essence often used as a first aid measure to induce calm) is also a key part of the management plan.

Herbal glucose-lowering medicines are often used to manage type 2 diabetes (See Table 1). There is good evidence for the effectiveness and safety of the medicines shown. Herbal glucose-lowering medicines have similar mechanisms of action as conventional glucose lowering medicines. If they are used together they can have additive effects and increase the risk of hypoglycaemia. Alternatively, they may enable lower doses of the more potent conventional medicines to be used and reduce hypoglycaemia. Significantly, people with diabetes are users of high herbal medicines.

In addition, naturopaths manage any concomitant problems such as Candida, pain, infections and depression: and anxiety that accompany hyperglycaemia and diabetes complications.

do so are underway and that may change in the future.

Naturopathic education standards vary, although most naturopaths currently undertake a four-year degree in government accredited courses.

People with diabetes wanting naturopathic advice should enquire about practitioner training before consulting a naturopath, as should health professionals before they refer to or consult a naturopath. Quality naturopathic training courses include a firm grounding in conventional medicine as well as naturopathy.

Summary

The naturopathic approach has many similarities to current diabetes management philosophy and strategies. Most naturopathic strategies are safe and beneficial but the combination has not been comprehensively researched, thus research is needed to determine the most effective and safest way to integrate the two.

References