



May 2006, Volume 145, Issue 5

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The First Thing That Ages You: Your Arteries (which will rust if you let them)

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The big issue with circulation is not just heart attacks and strokes in old people; it's about why the blood vessels in your body begin to rust. This rusting process is the same thing that happens when you cut an apple in half and it turns brown: It oxidizes. That's what happens inside your arteries, too. It goes on all the time—it's a natural process—and it affects every system of the body that uses blood, which is all of them.

So for your arteries to stay healthy, you have to be able to continually renew their inner surfaces. If you can't, because you don't have the right nutritional base or you're under more stress than you can keep up with, then you end up with damage that manifests itself in four very clear ways (besides heart attacks and strokes):

- 1) Wrinkles, which are the least important.
- 2) Impotence, which is largely dependent on how well the arteries open and close: Do they relax like they're supposed to?
- 3) Dementias—you're not as sharp.
- 4) Kidney problems, i.e., your water-purification system starts turning out sludge.

Now, those are issues that everyone's concerned about. It's not just a matter of the eighty-five-year-old finally having the big one. It's about you performing tonight in bed or being sharp at the office tomorrow. Those are quality-of-life issues for today.

A whole host of things make it more difficult for your body to get rid of this rust, but elevated blood pressure is the main one. Which is why that's our first question as doctors: What's your blood pressure? The average American's blood pressure is about 130 over 85. But then again, the average American dies of heart disease, so maybe that's not good enough. It turns out that the optimal blood pressure is 115 over 75. Once you understand that high blood pressure punches holes in the inner lining of your arterial walls, then you see why keeping it under control is so important.

In this country, stress is often cited as a major cause of high blood pressure. But really it's the *response* to stress—not the stress itself—that raises blood pressure and triggers all these circulatory illnesses. So if you manage that response with tools like meditation or even just being conscious of your breathing, your body will age much less quickly.

Do You Know Where Your Omentum Is?

Our bodies are very well designed to deal with periods of acute stress—and then relaxation. That's a typical mode of survival. Stuff's happening! You gotta do it now! Stuff's done, you kick back and relax. Those stressful events are actually very healthy for us. They rev up our engines and work out the kinks in the complex enzymatic reactions that control our bodies. In the end, these systems should reach homeostasis, a peaceful, balanced coexistence that is ready to spring into action in an emergency. But if we don't get time to idle, the balance gets thrown off and problems can develop.

When stress is chronic, it forces an excess of steroids and other stress hormones into our bodies from the adrenal glands stimulated by the brain (specifically the hypothalamus and pituitary). These are stress steroids, and our system has to cope with them. It does so in several ways, and one of the classic ways is that the omentum, a fold of fatty tissue that encases your intestines, sucks up the excess circulating steroids to clear the

system. This stimulates the omentum to inappropriately store fat whenever we eat—which is one of the reasons that stress induces you to grow a beer belly. When you're thin, your omentum looks like wide, webbed panty hose. But as it grows, the fat globules fill and engorge the gaps in the webbing. At this point, the excess omentum actually becomes a reservoir that releases inflammatory chemicals into the body: You're basically being poisoned by the fat in your belly. That creates a chronic condition called metabolic syndrome. It includes high blood sugars, high blood pressure, and high lousy (LDL) cholesterol. Sound familiar? That's America. Most people in the thirty-five-to-forty-five-year-old range start getting it. And that is the exact process we want to arrest.

So how do you deal with it? The quick answer is: Lose some weight. The omentum and the fat around your solid organs like your kidneys are the first things to shrink when you start shedding pounds. And when you reduce this fat, you automatically reduce the amount of inflammatory chemicals that are being dumped into your liver, which in turn leads to reduced production of stress-inducing proteins. That's why weight loss affects blood pressure. It's not just because your belly is smaller; it's because there's less fat surrounding your organs.

Foods Are Drugs

There are many simple steps you can take to lose weight, and you probably know them all already: increase your exercise, decrease your calorie intake, eat more fruits and vegetables—all that stuff. But remember, the issue here is blood pressure, not weight. And with that in mind, the big epiphany is that foods are drugs: They act like drugs. If you don't appreciate how those foods are acting upon your system, you're not doctoring yourself very well. But once you do understand this, you can use food like medicine. This is about you becoming more attuned to how what you eat affects how you feel.

An example is high-fructose corn syrup—you know, from soft drinks. (To be fair, not all brands use it.) High-fructose corn syrup disrupts the secretion of leptin, a crucial chemical released by your fat that tells your brain, "Hey, the tank is full." So when you drink a twelve-ounce regular soda, not only do you get the 140 calories from the corn syrup, but that corn syrup encourages you to also eat a couple extra handfuls of chips (costing you 125 calories), because you've poisoned your internal autopilot system for fat control.

For a lot of us, grabbing that soda and those chips has become a habit, especially at work; eating is often how we respond to stress. What you want to do is develop healthier habits.

Water, Walnuts, Wine

First, just keep water by your desk. Simple as that. It has no calories, and it satisfies the stress response of wanting to put something in your mouth.

Second, when you do need a snack, eat a handful of nuts. Just bring a little container of walnuts and almonds to work and keep it in your desk drawer. It's a simple, small thing, but it means you don't graze, you don't just grab whatever and put it in your mouth. A couple of handfuls a day will keep you energized, and they'll make you feel full for a long time, so you'll be less inclined to overeat at lunch and dinner. Nuts bring up another important topic here: fats. See "Things A Man Should Know About Fats" for more on "good" versus "bad fats."

One last thing: red wine. Now, we don't recommend keeping it at your desk (at least for daytime use), but we do recommend it. Red wine has both alcohol and resveratrol (a powerful anti-oxidant found in grape skin), and it turns off the gene for the inflammatory proteins, called VCAM-1. These proteins ride around in your bloodstream, and when there's a foreign body, like a toxic molecule from an infection or a toxin, the proteins attach it to your arterial wall, which stimulates inflammation that can lead to accelerated cholesterol plaques, blood clots, impotence, and even a heart attack or stroke. One to two glasses of red wine a day will help prevent that. So, cheers.

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