

The Nutrition Reporter™

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EXTRA

The independent newsletter that reports vitamin, mineral, and food therapies

Why Drug Costs Aren't the Real Issue

By Jack Challem

To save money, tens of thousands—and perhaps even millions—of Americans buy their prescription drugs from Canadian and Mexican pharmacies. It's no secret that the drug companies don't like this type of discount shopping because it cuts into their profits.

But the ongoing controversy over the cost of prescription drugs skirts several more important issues. The problem is not so much the high cost of drugs. Rather, it's our unnecessary and excessive dependence on them.

The pharmaceutical industry has promoted the view that prescription drugs are panaceas. When we develop health problems, drugs are assumed to be the miracle medicine. Yet drugs do not "cure" diseases. At best, they relieve some symptoms while also posing serious side effects. In hospitals alone, prescription drugs account for just over 100,000 deaths each year.

It's easy to forget that diseases are always easier to prevent than to reverse. That's because the most catastrophic diseases—cancer, heart disease, Alzheimer's, diabetes—take years to develop and become apparent enough for diagnosis.

And so how can we prevent these and other diseases, as well as reduce our dependence on drugs?

Sorry if this sounds like an old saw: eat healthier foods, take at least a multivitamin, exercise a little, and find ways to offset the stress in your life.

But public health efforts to promote healthier eating habits and lifestyles are overwhelmed by relentless advertising for soft drinks (which contain one-half cup of sugar in a two-liter bottle), various other junk foods, and fast foods that sabotage the best of intentions.

These low-nutrient foods contain large amounts of sugars, refined carbohydrates, and trans fats relative to their protein, vegetables, and fiber – a ratio that sets the stage for overweight and diabetes.

Add the work and home stresses of contemporary life, and there's little time for cooking a healthy meal or going out for a regular walk.

So when something starts to ache, we want our doctor to prescribe one of those miracle drugs.

But haven't we learned our lesson yet? Hormone-replacement therapy (HRT) was originally marketed to prevent hot flashes and preserve bone density in menopausal women. After billions of dollars in profits over 30 years, the drug companies could no longer deny that these drugs increased the risk of heart disease and cancer.

A similar story recently unfolded with Vioxx, which earned its maker billions of dollars over the past five years. The drug was withdrawn from the market because it doubled a person's risk of heart attack and stroke.

Prescription drugs should not be the first treatment of choice, except in emergencies. They're just too expensive and risky. Rather, our first option always should be modifying eating habits and lifestyle. Hippocrates got it right 2,000 years ago – let food be your medicine – but the concept still seems foreign.

Dietary improvements work, and they work surprisingly fast. Eating a high-protein, low-glycemic breakfast results in improved blood sugar levels – and less of a tendency toward diabetes – by lunchtime. People who skip breakfast actually eat more throughout the rest of the day and are more likely to gain weight.

One recent study found that calcium and B-vitamin supplements alone could slash health-care costs by \$15 billion dollars. But those impressive savings would cut into the profits of drug companies and hospitals – which is why there's no genuine effort to reduce health-care costs.

If our political leaders – and even our physicians – are serious about preventing disease and controlling health care costs, they must give more than lip service to encouraging better dietary and lifestyle habits. Aggressively emphasizing prevention is the only ways to reduce our dependence on prescription drugs and to lower health-care costs. □

A Review of Recent Health Books

From time to time, supplemental issues of *The Nutrition Reporter*TM review recently published nutrition and health books. To order these books, check with your local bookstore or connect to amazon.com via www.feedyourgenesright.com.

Feed Your Genes Right, by Jack Challem (John Wiley & Sons, 2005, \$24.95). Allow me to indulge myself. *Feed Your Genes Right* describes how our genes depend on good nutrition for normal functioning (and our overall health). The book describes a general dietary and supplement program for maintaining healthy genes and improving the activity of less-than-healthy genes we've inherited. It also focuses on the nutritional genetics of many common diseases, including heart disease, cancer, Alzheimer's, birth defects, and sickle-cell anemia. The message throughout the book is simple: genes may be the blueprint for how our bodies work, but nutrition usually has far more bearing on health.

Medical Mavericks (Vol 3), by Hugh D. Riordan, MD (Bio-Communications Press, 2005, \$14.95). Being a medical maverick, the late Riordan was fascinated by the lives of other physicians and researchers who found their original ideas going against the grain of conventional medicine. In this third book of the *Medical Mavericks* series, Riordan describes the lives of nutritionally minded physicians and scientists, including Abram Hoffer, Carl Pfeiffer, Emanuel Cheraskin, and Linus Pauling. It's a fascinating book that helps the reader understand what makes these great people tick. Riordan died in January 2005, just minutes after expressing his delight at finishing the manuscript. Order it through www.brightspot.org.

In Praise of Slowness: How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed, by Carl Honoré (HarperCollins, 2004, \$24.95). Everything in our lives seems to get faster and faster: work, driving, communication, eating, and even sex. In recent years, the "rat race" has morphed into 24/7, with people endlessly tied to work and sacrificing their physical and mental health in trying to do everything too quickly. Honoré describes his own epiphany – always being rushed and pressured by deadlines and, at an airport, seeing a copy of "The One-Minute Bedtime Story." At first he thought it was the perfect solution for fulfilling his obligation to read to his child, so he could quickly go back to work, and then he realized the perversity of the situation. Honoré describes the problems associated with trying to do everything faster and faster in an easy conversational style. But he also recommends ways to slow down, savor life, and in the end actually be more productive.

Get Saucy, by Grace Parisi (Harvard Common Press, 2005, \$17.95). It wasn't until my 49th year that I learned how to cook – and discovered that cooking can be a wonderful, creative experience. There are so many good cookbooks on the market, but simple homemade sauces can transform a tired piece of chicken or fish into a truly remarkable meal. While some of Parisi's sauce recipes contain sugar or refined carbs, they are easy to sidestep – after all, *Get Saucy* contains 500 sauce recipes! I happen to be a fan of pesto sauces stir fried with chicken or shrimp, and this book offers more than 35 different pesto recipes. To save time, you can make a huge batch of pesto, freezing serving sizes in an ice-cube tray, and then sealing the pesto chunks in a plastic bag.

Death by Modern Medicine, by Carolyn Dean, MD, and Trueman Tuck (Matrix Vérité, 2005, \$29.99). Thirty years ago, an issue of the *National Lagoon* spoofed medicine as "the nation's number one killer." Today, it's all too close to the truth. Dean and Tuck describe a health-care system gone wrong, one that routinely violates Hippocrates' urging that doctors "first do no harm." The system today is driven more by bureaucratic requirements, drug company profits, and false promises of cures. It's the very reason why many of us would rather use alternative and natural therapies.

Adrenaline Junkies and Serotonin Seekers, by Matt Church (Ulysses Press, 2004, \$12.95). I'm generally suspicious of books that try to divide all people into just a few distinct types. However, this book does a reasonably good job of describing two common types of people: those who need a jolt of adrenaline to accomplish anything, and those whose personal habits suggest a greater need for serotonin. Both substances are neurotransmitters that affect our moods, thinking processes, and behavior. The book is easy to read and contains many gems of information, though it often restates the same information.

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