

A Review of Recent Health Books

By Jack Challem, Editor and Publisher

A philosopher might have written, "One does not live by newsletters alone." Over the past year or so, many excellent books have crossed the desk of THE NUTRITION REPORTER. Here are reviews of those that have impressed us the most.

Dr. Atkins' Vita-Nutrient Solution: Nature's Answer to Drugs, by Robert C. Atkins, MD (Simon & Schuster, 1998, \$24.00).

Many of you may recognize Dr. Atkins' name from his high-protein, low-carbohydrate diet of some 25 years ago. His *Vita-Nutrient Solution* is one of his best books, an easy-reading yet comprehensive reference book organized by individual vitamins, minerals, amino acids, fats, digestive aids, herbs, and other nutritional supplements. The book also provides dosage information for many common health problems. The *Vita-Nutrient Solution* has quickly turned into one of my key references when I need general information on specific supplements or dosage information. The book is also well referenced, in case you want to look up Atkins' citations on Medline. This is not the latest "cure of the month" book. It's a solid reference, and I heartily recommend it to physicians and consumers alike.

The Complete German Commission E Monographs: Therapeutic Guide to Herbal Medicines, edited by Mark Blumenthal, et al. (American Botanical Council, Austin, Texas, 1998, \$189).

In the late 1970s, the German government established a commission of experts to clearly define the medical use of herbal medicines. Today, the German *Commission E Monographs* cover dozens of herbal remedies and are generally regarded as one of the most comprehensive therapeutic guides to herbal medicine. As a result, herbal medicines are commonly prescribed by German physicians. Recognizing that a book of this scientific caliber was needed in the United States, the non-profit American Botanical Council spent several years translating all of the German monographs into English. This is a huge book – almost 700 pages – that describes 190 individual herbs and herbal combinations approved for therapeutic use in Germany. This is a serious reference book, prepared for physicians, botanical researchers, and professional herbalists, not the average consumer. If you're serious about the scientific and medical rationale for herbal medicine, this translation of

the *German Commission E Monographs* should have a respected place on your bookshelf.

The Green Pharmacy, by James A. Duke, PhD (Rodale, 1997, \$29.95/hardcover, \$6.99/paperback).

I've only recently gotten to know Jim Duke, but I quickly realized that he is a national treasure. I think of him as the unofficial herbal laureate of the United States. Duke is a botanist specializing in the study of medicinal plants, and this book revels in the idea that plants are our best medicines. Organized by condition (running the gamut from corns to various types of heart disease), *The Green Pharmacy* is a highly readable home reference guide on the rationale behind herbal medicines with lots of sound advice on how to use them. If you're the type of person who keeps an aloe plant on your kitchen windowsill to treat burns, you should keep this book on your shelf to help preserve your health.

The Alpha Lipoic Acid Breakthrough, by Burt Berkson, MD, PhD (Prima, 1998, \$12.95).

Dr. Berkson tells the fascinating story of alpha lipoic acid, a vitamin-like substance produced in the body and found in foods, such as spinach and meat. It's a sulfur-containing nutrient that boosts production of glutathione, the body's primary endogenous antioxidant. The author is one of the world's leading experts on alpha lipoic acid. His introduction to this amazing substance came in the 1970s when he used it to prevent liver failure and death in several people who had eaten poisonous *Amanita* mushrooms. In Germany, alpha lipoic acid is treated as a prescription drug for the treatment of diabetic nerve damage. In the United States, it is rightfully an over-the-counter dietary supplement. Recent research has found that it is a powerful antioxidant and capable of recycling other antioxidants in the body. It also reduces blood sugar levels (good for diabetics) and, based on animal studies, may limit brain damage from strokes. You'll get the science and references, but Berkson's own anecdotes and ability as a story teller make this book fun to read as well as informative.

Biochemical Individuality, by Roger J. Williams, PhD (Keats, 1998, \$19.95).

Biochemical Individuality, first published in 1956, is one of the classics of nutrition science. Unfortunately, over the years, the concept of biochemical individuality has been forgotten or ignored by many nutritionists,

dietitians, and physicians. The idea is really quite simple: because of genetic variations, each of us has highly individualized nutritional requirements. We need the same essential nutrients, but we need them in very different amounts – and some people need very large amounts of specific nutrients to achieve and maintain normal health. Biochemical individuality explains, scientifically and conceptually, why some people seem to need only dietary levels of vitamins and minerals, while others need large supplemental doses. Don't be put off by the fact that this book is more than 40 years old. It is one of the most original and significant books ever published in the field of nutrition, and it's as eye opening today as it was years ago. I'm glad that Keats Publishing has reissued the book; no health professional should be granted a degree without reading it.

The Carnitine Miracle, by Robert Crayhon, MS (Evans, 1998, \$19.95).

The danger with single-nutrient books – and there are lots of them – is that consumers can become overwhelmed by too many “miracle” nutrients. But Robert Crayhon is a capable nutrition counselor and educator, and in this book he describes the many benefits of carnitine with a minimum of hyperbole. Carnitine, a component of protein, is often overlooked as a supplement. It is needed to transport fats into the cell, where they are burned for energy. That alone should be a clue to the benefits of this nutrient. Carnitine has been shown to increase energy levels and well being in people suffering from Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and valproate toxicity. Just a side note: if you have elevated blood levels of triglyceride, a major risk factor for heart disease, this book is especially for you. When the body fails to burn fats – such as when there is inadequate carnitine available – the body stores the fats as triglyceride.

The Omega Plan, by Artemis P. Simopoulos, MD, and Jo Robinson. (HarperCollins, 1998, \$24)

Over the past decade or so, Americans have been coerced, through misguided public health recommendations and advertising, into being fat phobic. Too many people believe that low-fat or no-fat foods contribute to health. The problem with this line of thinking is that fats are actually essential nutrients – and fat-too many Americans have ended up eating diets seriously unbalanced in fats. This book emphasizes the important but overlooked roles that omega-3 fatty acids (found in fish and flax-seed) play in health. The typical American diet currently favors pro-inflammatory omega-6 vegetable oils, which increase the risk of cancer and aggravate arthritis. Simopoulos and Robinson recommend that people restore a balance of dietary fats by adding anti-inflammatory omega-3 and omega-9 fatty acids (found in olive oil) to the diet. They're right on track.

Healing Anxiety with Herbs, by Harold H. Bloomfield, MD (HarperCollins, 1998, \$23.00).

We live in stress-filled times, and people have anxiety for all sorts of reasons, including pressures at work and home and frustrating rush-hour commutes. Stress and anxiety increase the body's production of stress hormones, which shorten life span and increase the risk of disease. In this book, Bloomfield makes a strong case for using herbs to reduce anxiety. Its strength is that it doesn't focus on one particular herb – rather, it describes many herbs, with clear advice on how to use them. If you can't change your job or lifestyle to reduce stress levels, Bloomfield offers sound advice on how to naturally and safely de-stress yourself.

The Avery FAQs™ Series, various titles and authors. (Avery Publishing Group, 1998, 1999, \$2.99 each, 1-800-548-5757).

I have to recommend this expanding series of health primers, of which I am the series editor. While two- and three-pound nutrition books have a lot of weighty information, they're often too overwhelming in content and price for consumers interested in getting basic, understandable information about nutrition and health. Each of the FAQs Series books (e.g., *All About Vitamins*, *All About B Vitamins*, *All About St. John's Wort*, *All About Garlic*) presents basic information simply – in a question-and-answer format. (FAQ stands for Frequently Asked Questions, an internet term.) Forty-some books are currently in progress, covering vitamins, minerals, herbs, basic nutrition, and specific diseases. Most of the books are 96 pages, which is enough space to treat nutritional topics with justice but not to overwhelm the reader. These are consumer books with a strong “how to” bent. The FAQs series books started coming off the press in September, and new titles are being published monthly.

Order these books through local book stores,

<http://www.amazon.com>

and <http://barnesandnoble.com>

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