

### Caring for Our Elderly with Heart Disease - The Role of Diet Therapy

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#### COLUMN ARTICLE

#### Introduction

Heart disease can affect millions of patients and can be a life-threatening condition with poor quality of life, burden of hospitalizations and premature death Yancy, *et al.* [1], Ponikowski P, *et al* [2]. The philosophy of preventative and holistic care seems to be growing in popularity because for many patients, having reasonable health is a priority to them as they are willing to engage with orthodox medicine and combine it with diet and lifestyle interventions (Rajeswaran, *et al.* 2012). Supporting our elderly patients with heart disease is further compromised because the nature of frailty is multiple health conditions like diabetes and for some less mobility or cognitive function. In this groups of patients' diet therapy are considered a better alternative when combined with personalised exercise. A comprehensively structured personal dietary and exercise plan should be explored more in clinical practice for elderly care [3] with heart disease.

If a patient is willing to learn and change; supporting them may benefit the individual and contribute towards reducing hospitalization whilst a positive contribution towards quality of life (Beverly, *et al.* 2013). This is especially the case when older people who are at an increased risk of heart condition are offered a personal approach to diet therapy. The idea is to use existing healthy eating models and

adapt them to suit the individual needs where the benefits can be huge. Personalising nutritional considers the many personalities and behaviours of older people as these are likely to influence their food preferences more so (Iwasa, *et al.* 2008). It is necessary for health care professionals to consider this factor as they see patients with heart disease because small changes to the diet may have a positive effect on physiological health most especially if they care older or live in a residential setting Muurinen S, Soini H, Suominen M and Pitkälä K [4]. Interestingly the DASH diet and the Mediterranean diet have shown to reduce cognitive decline in older patients so clearly there is benefit to encourage patients to eat a healthy diet [5]. Both of these diets are plant based with an abundance of fruits, vegetables, legumes, healthy oils and whole grains - the idea is to reduce unhealthy fats, red meat and refined carbohydrates [6]. A healthy balanced diet and regular activity are essential components to health and wellbeing (Ngandu, *et al.* 2015) and many older patients do like to engage with both. A healthy diet is essential for heart health and for those with that have had rehabilitation as part of their care for coronary heart disease [7].

#### What are healthy carbohydrates?

Beetroot is a low to medium GI root vegetable depending on if it is cooked or raw and may contribute towards reducing harmful cholesterol in blood resulting formation of plaque and blocked arteries.



Figure 1

Carrots are a great source of vitamin A and dietary fibre and a low carbohydrate that can be used in soups and heart healthy main meals. Steaming them will help retain their colour and nutrients and for older patients they need to be soft enough to reduce the risk of choking. They make a hearty supper meal when combined with red split lentils and a whole meal roll.



Figure 2

Cauliflower is a cruciferous seasonal favourite vegetable and low in carbohydrates. The versatility is huge from simple dishes to complex and new trends in creating delicious low calorie, low fat and low carbohydrate meals. It contains phytochemicals flavonoids and glucosinolates that support the immune system, rich in vitamin C, folate for heart health, vitamin K for controlling inflammation and dietary fibre for a healthy digestive system.



Figure 3

Potatoes are still a warm favourite and there are plenty of varieties to consider, including sweet potatoes. Potatoes are a starchy vegetable with around 85% energy, and they contain many nutrients from B6, riboflavin, thiamine, folate, vitamin C and minerals potassium, magnesium and iron.



Figure 4

Legumes and Beans are a good protein source known for helping to reduce cholesterol, reducing blood pressure and improving gut health.



Figure 5

### Mental health, nutrition and heart health

Mental health has gained more interest in those with have 'lifestyle diseases', one of which may be raised risk of heart disease. Our elderly patients equally experience low mood, anxiety, depression and even symptoms of psychosis. Those with dementia are at risk of further complications when they have impaired mental awareness so our thoughts should be to help reduce many mental stresses our patients may have. Stress is a big factor in heart health – using a holistic approach to reduce stress, anxiety and depression may open the dialogue where health professionals can engage in positive discussions about all aspects of care. One simple step is a healthy diet that includes fruits, vegetables, healthy proteins and healthy fats. Mental health can develop from a diet that is based on refined sugars, unhealthy fats, increased salt intake and alcohol. Those who may live alone may not have the benefit of a healthy diet so are likely to opt for more convenience foods that are often high in fat, sugar and carbohydrates.

### Summary

Diet therapy is not complex, but it can help with heart health when health professionals engage with this therapy in addition to other medical interventions. The Mediterranean Diet and the DASH diet both have good clinical evidence to show health benefits – these are the diets that many clinicians recommend but in the everyday world of the elderly patient, this diet does require adaptation and personalising to accommodate the individual needs. We are now entering the colder months where it is natural for many of to increase energy intake from our diet – often the additional energy comes from unhealthy food sources from increased portions to more cakes, sugary foods, high salt and high fat foods. For those with heart disease or any other associated disease, particularly the elderly may benefit from a holistic approach to their heart health care, this incorporates necessary forms of medical interventions to simple and less evasive approaches such as diet therapy. Advice on eating healthy may actually be a simple tool that many clinicians do have available but may of use frequently – yet using this simple tool as an addition to conventional care may actually give the patient more self-control and

they are likely to engage with a positive approach because the word of a cardiologist is one of power and a strong endorsement. Diet therapy considers the physical health, mental health and potential issues that may be a concern for the individual, including access to healthy meals. A holistic approach for elderly patients is more effective because many will engage with a personal touch and open to making dietary changes to support their health and well-being.

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