



The tragic truth of antidepressants

Why you're better off passing on the SSRIs—and using natural solutions instead

If you're suffering from depression, the promise of relief in the form of a little pill can feel like a lifeline. So the fact that antidepressants have few—if any—real benefits is, well... *depressing*.

That's the conclusion published last month in the British Medical Journal. And it's consistent with views I have presented before in *Insiders' Cures*. My practice in forensic medicine backs it up too. I've seen case after case of depressed patients committing suicide... *after they start taking "antidepressant" drugs*.

Making matters worse

It's not that antidepressants don't do anything—it's just that they do the wrong thing. The newer antidepressant drugs act as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs). They artificially raise levels of serotonin in the brain by preventing its normal re-uptake into nerve cells after it's released into nerve pathways.

This is believed to help depression symptoms. And it does...but not the symptoms that need to be improved.

In my forensic medicine practice, I saw case after case of chronically depressed patients with suicidal thoughts. But they were too depressed to take action and do anything about it. *Until they got their dose of SSRIs, that is*. Once the drugs kicked in, the patients still had their suicidal thoughts, and now they had the energy to act on them. The results were tragic.

Even more tragic is that some mentally troubled, depressed patients have thoughts about harming others as well. Disturbing new analysis indicates many of the recent violent tragedies grabbing the headlines may be the result of antidepressants.

That's because depression has a built-in self-protection. It causes people to turn inward, close themselves off, and they lack the energy to carry out actions. Instead they just endlessly think these thoughts, many of them negative. Psychiatrists call this *thought substitution*. So even if people have thought of hurting themselves or others, they often don't have the energy or ability to do it.

Now give the depressed person Prozac. You haven't changed anything about the real causes of the depression. But, suddenly, the depressed person's brain is flooded with serotonin. And now they finally have the energy to act.

I'll leave it to statisticians to debate whether SSRIs cause suicide in depressed patients. But as a physician, the evidence in real cases of suffering human beings is all too obvious.

Still, serotonin is not just a loaded gun waiting to go off. And while I don't recommend artificially manipulating your serotonin levels as a treatment for any disease, I can tell you that there are natural approaches that really work. They help the body naturally restore its own proper levels

of serotonin, acetylcholine, and other neurotransmitters. And that makes for a healthy mind and body.

I'll tell you more about these natural depression helpers in a minute. But first...

Antidepressants on the rise

Why are prescriptions for antidepressants going up and up, while the people taking them continue slipping down into their depression?

Some psychiatrists claim it's because of a small, but appropriate, increase in the length of treatment—not the number of patients being treated. That is, patients are being kept on the drug longer.

But why keep people on the same tired medication if it's not working?

The real issue is that too many people are being treated for something

Continued on page 2...

In this issue:

- How Ancient medicine can lead to modern healing—without the expense of drugs or supplements..... 4**
- Tune in to healthy joints..... 6**
- Stop stressing over being overweight 7**
- From spy novel to medicine shelf..... 8**

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that's just a normal part of life—not a disease in need of a pharmaceutical cure. The current definition of clinical depression is two weeks of “low mood.” I can think of a number of people whose moods were low for a couple weeks after the last election. But I wouldn't call it a disease—and I certainly wouldn't want to medicate it away!

A more serious mental illness is being so delusional that you can't recognize when bad and sad things are happening in reality—and that's much worse than two weeks of “low mood.”

But some parties have reason to be in a good mood about the overuse of antidepressants. **Three-quarters of psychiatrists who write the definitions of depression used in the psychiatric manual have links to drug companies.**¹ So they have good motivation to put people on prescriptions and abandon more time-intensive—but effective—mental health treatments! (Think psychoanalysis, talk therapy, and even spiritual approaches.)

Depression may be the perfect condition for the drug industry: Incurable, common, long-term (even with these so-called “treatments”), and involving multiple medications. Some experts say contemporary psychiatry's relationship with the drug industry has created a pharmaceutical mindset to treat mental illness.

But the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence does not even support the use of antidepressants for mild depression. Instead it favors psychological talk-based therapies.

Of course, the government-industrial-insurance complex doesn't want to pay health professionals for the time it takes to really help patients. Instead they push the quick treatment—the few seconds it takes to scribble on a prescription pad

(often with the name of the drug also advertised at the top).

Perhaps *that's* why antidepressant prescriptions increased by almost 10 percent in 2011.

The upside of being down

Occasional “low mood” may simply be a fact of life. In fact, research shows that mildly depressed people are actually better at assessing and dealing with life's circumstances. Sometimes low mood is just our way of seeing that all is not well, and that we need to protect ourselves.

Shakespeare was no stranger to low mood when he wrote the character of Hamlet. When Hamlet perceives that “something is rotten in the state of Denmark,” it leads to his famous soliloquy: “To be, or not to be—that is the question... whether to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing them, end them.”

Sounds like an appropriate response to a dangerous situation, doesn't it? To most of us anyway... But not to some ever-alert psychiatrists, who have used that soliloquy to diagnose Hamlet as depressed.

Nature's answer to depression

While antidepressant drugs may be worse than worthless for many or most people, many natural approaches can enhance brain, mind, and mood. And of course all of those work together, especially when talking about neurochemicals like serotonin. Here are just a few natural ways to get serotonin levels to their natural, optimal levels.

Omega 3s. Omega 3—rich foods (salmon, sardines, walnuts, flaxseeds, and olive oil for example) may help depression. And we already know they're powerhouses in other areas of

health. Researchers think omega 3-rich foods affect structural fats in brain membranes, making it easier for nutrients to enter cells.

Folic acid (and other B vitamins).

Low levels of folic acid and high levels of an amino acid-like chemical called homocysteine are associated with depression. Folic acid, as well as vitamins B2, B6, and B12, have all been shown to decrease levels of homocysteine and protect against heart disease, as we document in *The Insider's Secret to Conquering High Blood Pressure and Protecting Your Heart*, which you received as a new subscriber. Find B vitamins in fruits, vegetables, nuts, whole grains, and legumes. If you're taking a supplement, look for 800 mcg folic acid, 2.5 mg thiamine, 5 mg B6, and 20 mcg B12.

Amino acids. Tryptophan is an amino acid needed to make serotonin. For many years higher tryptophan has been found to be associated with lower depression rates. Tryptophan is high in foods containing proteins (which are chains of amino acids), such as meat, fish, beans, and eggs.

Nucleic acids. Research at McLean Hospital in Belmont, MA, has shown foods high in uridine improves mood. Uridine is a nucleic acid found at high levels in beets and molasses. Beets are also a rich source of betaine, which is critical in maintaining proper antioxidant balance in cells.


Carbohydrates. Carbohydrates are broken down into sugar your brain needs to function properly. However, simple sugar or too much carbohydrate can cause or aggravate depression. Avoid this problem by eating a diet low in refined carbohydrates and sugar and high in fruits and vegetables.

St. John's wort. This European folk remedy has been used for centuries as natural treatment for depression and anxiety. In Germany, for example, St. John's wort has long been approved for its effectiveness in treating mild depression. General dosage is 300 mg three times per day (at 0.3% standardized hypericin extract).

Antioxidants. A new study in the *Journal of the American Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* found that foods high in antioxidants (but not dietary supplements themselves) help stem depression in older adults. This is not surprising since foods contain a biological matrix that is important for proper absorption and metabolism. Plus most antioxidant supplements are of poor quality and not based on real science.

Proper hydration. What and how much you drink can influence mood as well. A small study of 25 women suggests dehydration can cause headaches, loss of focus, fatigue, and low mood. Now here's the really interesting thing. Even minor dehydration (about 1 percent lower than optimal) was enough to cause serious effects.

South African Red Bush (Rooibos). Of course, water alone is not enough to prevent dehydration. You need fluid and electrolytes—but not from so-called sports “hydration” beverages. Instead, I recommend the little-known South African Red Bush (rooibos). You've heard me sing this herb's praises before for all sorts of conditions. But it also packs a one-two punch for depression. It keeps you hydrated while also providing antidepressant effects and benefits for brain, mind, and mood. As a true adaptogen (helping the body adapt to stress), red bush will refresh you during

the day and relax you at bedtime. I generally recommend replacing your 8-glasses-a day with 4-6 glasses of rooibos tea—hot or iced. 

Citations available online at www.DrMicozzi.com

A truly depressing drink

You know from reading my *Daily Dispatch* emails that diet drinks are chock-full of nasty stuff. A new French study shows that diet drinks pose a higher diabetes risk than *even regular soda!* And now we're finding out they can affect your mood as well.

A just-off-the-press study links artificially sweetened beverages—especially diet drinks—with higher depression risk in adults. (Coffee, on the other hand, slightly lowered risk).¹

Researchers studied 263,925 people for about 10 years. Those who drank more than four cans of soda per day were nearly one-third more likely to develop depression than those who drank no soda. The same amount of fruit punch caused an almost 40 percent increased risk. The same amount of coffee, on the other hand, came with a 10 percent risk reduction.

Think it's just the sugar? Think again. As with the French study on diabetes, this study showed an *even greater* risk for people who drank diet versions of these drinks.

So, do your mood a favor. Pass on the sweet drinks and go for a cup of Joe or rooibos tea instead.

Citations available online at www.DrMicozzi.com

How Ancient medicine can lead to modern healing—without the expense of drugs or supplements

China is the birthplace of many of the world's most useful technologies—animal domestication, plant cultivation, and irrigation agriculture to name a few. But, for us today, its ancient healing system may stand out as China's brightest accomplishment.

Thousands of effective medicines from plants, and to a lesser extent from animal and mineral sources, were identified in China starting more than 3,000 years ago. And what's even more surprising is that those discoveries have endured for thousands of years. Billions of people around the world—in the east *and the west—still* rely on the healing powers of the substances discovered by the ancient Chinese.

Since writings ascribed to the semi-mythical divine emperor Shen Nong began guiding the Chinese people in the use of plants as food and medicine thousands of years ago, the link between cuisine and healing has been sealed in Chinese cultural and medical practice. And as food growing is by nature a seasonal practice, Chinese medical approaches differ accordingly with the seasons.

In fact, the food-medicine link is so integral to the Chinese culture that many traditional restaurants and hospitals in China serve dishes to treat specific conditions. And the foods that are used in medical therapy are also routinely prepared by families when seasons change, when illness strikes, to strengthen a woman after birth, and to nourish the elderly in their declining years.

Healthy digestion comes first

In Chinese medicine, the foundation for treating and preventing disease starts in the digestive system—represented as the spleen and stomach in the Chinese organ

There is a fine line between foods and herbs in Chinese medicine, and they are often used together. Even in the West we use herbs to spice our foods. But in Chinese medicine, plants are recognized for their potential as medicines.

system. The strength of the spleen and the stomach are critical to preventing, treating, or recovering from just about every condition. The reason? They are responsible for taking in food and fluids, transforming them to qi (vital energy) and blood, and transporting them throughout the body.

For a strong stomach and spleen, Chinese (and other) medical experts point out that it's not just *what* we eat, but also *how* we eat that makes a difference. Eating at odd times, wolfing down food on the run, and eating iced foods all weaken the spleen and stomach. That's an important lesson to take from Chinese medicine, where digestion is at the heart of every condition. In western medicine, we make the mistake of thinking about digestion only when people are having digestive problems—and considering only *what* we eat, and not *how* we eat.

As for the *what*, Chinese diet therapy emphasizes high-quality, properly prepared foods. Since foods were developed over thousands of years, it does not directly address the problems of modern agricultural practices such the use of antibiotics, food processing, herbicides, or genetic manipulation. But by focusing on the principles of traditional Chinese medicine, you can have good digestion and health. Eat only fresh, high-quality, unprocessed foods, and you'll avoid a lot of the modern dietary traps. Bonus: Fresh foods are also higher in both nutrients *and* vital energy (qi).

The properties of herbal medicines

There is a fine line between foods and herbs in Chinese medicine, and they are often used together. Even in the West we use herbs to spice our foods. But in Chinese medicine, plants are recognized for their potential as medicines. After all, plants contain biologically active constituents to protect against predators and as a means of survival. And some of those protective properties make them useful for humans. In fact, the antibacterial properties of many spices allow them to preserve meats and other foods. That's why they were so valuable during the colonial period to motivate Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, French, and British explorations of Asia and the "Spice Islands."

The five flavors

In Chinese cuisine, you can actually taste a food's healing properties. Everything is identified as having one or more of the five

different tastes. And each of those tastes has different actions in the body:

1. Sour (including astringent).

Actions: Retains and stops loss of fluids (for diarrhea, sweat). Generates fluids, promotes proper digestion. *Examples:* Hawthorne berries (cardioactive), lemon, apricots, cherries, and grapefruit.

2. Bitter. *Actions:* Drying and purging (for constipation, reflux, cough). *Examples:* Bitter melon and dandelion greens.

3. Sweet. *Actions:* Tonify and strengthen blood (for pain and spasms). *Examples:* Chicken, eggs, fruits, mutton, and root vegetables.

4. Pungent. *Actions:* Expels pathogens and promotes qi and blood flow. *Examples:* Chili, ginger, pepper, and spring onions.

5. Salty. *Actions:* Softens and resolves masses (such as goiter). *Examples:* Kelp and seaweed.

Nature and propensity tell the rest of the story

In addition to having different tastes, each food has a specific nature—cold, cool, warm, or hot—depending on its effects on the body. If it lowers a fever, it is considered cold. If it promotes blood circulation and warms the extremities, it's warm or hot.

After food is digested, it can affect the **direction** of the flow of qi: ascending, descending, floating, or sinking. Chinese medicine experts take this into account when choosing foods to treat different conditions. Here are a few examples:

- Ascending foods are used for diarrhea and organ prolapse.
- Descending foods help belching and indigestion, hiccups, nausea, and vomiting.

- Floating (dispersing) foods aid in the common cold and promote perspiration.

- Sinking foods treat constipation, high blood pressure, and mania.

A food's propensity determines the organ channel(s) to which it's likely to travel. Most foods go to at least two channels. For example, lemons, pears, and tangerines clear heat from the lung channel to stop coughs. Tangerines

In Chinese cuisine, you can actually taste a food's healing properties. Everything is identified as having one or more of the five different tastes.

also go to the stomach channel to address loss of appetite and nausea.

The flavor, nature, and channel propensity of a food helps determine its medicinal value.

Everything in season

Just as time of day is important in Chinese beliefs about eating, so is the season of the year. Beyond the fact that different foods are available in different seasons, in Chinese medicine the seasons have a direct effect on the body. And that helps determine which types of food are appropriate in each season.

Here's some guidance for what types of food to eat in each season:

- In **spring**, eat warming foods, more sweet than sour, to nourish spleen qi when liver qi is strong.
- In **summer**, digestion slows, so eat light foods to clear heat and generate fluids. Focus more on fruits and vegetables and less on meat.
- In **autumn**, avoid extremes of hot

or cold. Energy is diminishing and substance is growing. Eat foods that are moderate in nature.

- In **winter**, eat foods that tonify and rebalance, such as beef and mutton.

Of course, our air-conditioned-in-summer/heated-in-winter homes and offices work against the natural effects of the seasonal cycle. And both artificial cooling and heating of the air in which we live and breathe takes moisture out of the air year-round, contributing to chronic dehydration. Add some warming foods to your light summer diet of fruits and vegetables. In winter, add moistening foods.

Seasons of life

Just as with the seasons of the year, Chinese medicine guides us through the seasons of life. In children, internal damp syndromes frequently lead to stuffy or runny noses, asthma, and ear infections. Cold and moist foods such as dairy aggravate damp conditions—which makes the Western obsession with pushing dairy and milk (and especially feeding cow's milk instead of breast milk) on infants and children seem like a bad idea.

The elderly have weakening digestions, so they should eat small, frequent meals, and well-cooked and easy to digest soups and stews.

In pregnant women, fluids collect in certain channels while others are relatively dry. So drying foods such as spices and wines should be avoided.

Emotional states also have an effect on digestion. Stress hinders spleen and stomach function and calls for an easy-to-digest diet that tonifies the spleen. Anger and disappointment require a diet that soothes the liver qi.

Scratching the surface

Even though the traditional system of Chinese medicine is thousands of


Continued on page 6...

years older than Western medicine, its wisdom is applicable even today. But as you can tell from this brief article, it's a complex system that requires a great deal of study to understand properly.

You can learn more through my book *Celestial Healing: Energy Mind and Spirit in Traditional Medicines of*

China and East and Southeast Asia, available through Amazon.com.

If you want to tap into this ancient healing system to treat or prevent disease, work with a traditional Chinese medicine practitioner. There is an organization called the National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine

(NCCA), in Washington, D.C. They have a directory available on their website at www.nccaom.org where you can search for a certified practitioner near you. Or, you can try the The American Association of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine at www.aaaomonline.org. 

Tune in to healthy joints

A breakthrough discovery can help joints, even when tired old tests—and tired old supplements—can't

When you're suffering from joint pain, the last thing you want to hear from a doctor is, "The X-rays don't show anything wrong," or "the scans are normal."

Because even if the tests—X-rays, CAT scans, MRIs—show "normal" results, you know you're in pain. *And that's not normal.*

Luckily, doctors in the know can use a common-sense approach to determine how your joints are really doing...without painful and expensive tests that are largely useless anyway. Or even counterproductive, as I've cautioned readers in the past. In fact, the approach relies on using one of the five senses to get insight into the joints, like they have been doing with the heart and lungs for centuries.

Doctors can simply *listen* to your joints to find out whether they're moving freely. That's because at the microscopic level, painful joints move like a bow across a violin string, instead of sliding smoothly, without friction. A violin bow causes a series of rapid "sticks and slips"—and thus vibrations—on the string.

That's what makes the music.

But when your joints make those little sticks and slips, it's anything but musical. But it does make noise. And with the new testing device, the "surface force apparatus" (SFA), doctors can hear those vibrations.

Instead of just relying on a shadowy picture of what your joints look like, the SFA allows doctors to hear what's actually *happening* in your live joints as they move in real time. With an understanding of the condition of your joints—at a microscopic level—you can monitor wear-and-tear, as well as whether your joint supplements are working.


Get help...before it's too late

It's important to know what's really happening in your joints so you can fix them before it's too late. *Without having to stand in the joint-replacement assembly line.*

The new SFA device is still under experimental development, but that doesn't mean you can't start taking some lessons from it. The developers of this brilliant SFA device are quick to point out that there's one way to

stop this friction in your joints. And that's by improving the condition of your joint (synovial) fluid. This fluid is *critical* to preventing and healing damage.

Controlling inflammation in the joints and joint fluid is crucial, since inflammation is both a result of wear-and-tear and a cause of more damage. It creates a vicious cycle that can overcome our innate healing ability. Getting your inflammation in check is the best way to let damaged joints heal at the microscopic level, while the damage can still be undone.

As I've discussed before, there are ways to help nourish joint cartilage and underlying bone, *and* help your body control inflammation. And it's not with the tired, old joint supplement ingredients that may be worse than worthless. Look for a high-quality joint supplement with proven ingredients such as *Boswellia serrata*, cayenne, vitamin C, and/or omega-3 fish oil. For more details and recommendations, see the July 2012 and February 2013 issues of *Insiders' Cures*. 

CORRECTION: There was a dosage error in the original printing of the February 2013 *Insiders' Cures* article entitled "Why those tired, old "natural" arthritis fixes don't work." On page 5, it states "A healthy dose [of vitamin D] is 1,000-2,000 mg per day." The correct dose is 1,000-2,000 I.U. (International Units) per day.

Stop stressing over being overweight

Once again, science shows us moderation is the key to health and happiness

If you've been obsessing over losing those last 15 pounds, it's time to find something else to worry about.

A large analysis by the National Center for Health Statistics—which used data from nearly 100 countries—will change the way you think about weight. It showed that moderate overweight is associated with lower disease and death rates.

And this isn't one of those studies whose authors simply report a statistical anomaly without understanding science. It is difficult to discount this kind of analysis of straightforward vital statistics. I've seen this apparent paradox in my own practice. Plus, several other recent studies bear it out. An author of one of these studies, published in *JAMA*, is my colleague Barry Graubard—who has never been one to shy away from the science just because it went against the prevailing, politically correct “wisdom.” (Twenty years ago, he worked on our analysis with Nobel laureate Baruch Blumberg that showed excess iron is related to higher cancer rates.)

Disease by the numbers

So if a little extra weight is actually good for you, why are we always hearing the scary statistics? You already know: Two-thirds of adult Americans are overweight, and one-third are obese. And obesity is linked to increased blood pressure and higher risks of diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and kidney disease.

We don't hear as much about studies that show people who are carrying some extra weight actually have better outcomes. Or the ones that show heavier people have lower mortality than “normal” weight

people. Many of these findings apply to people with diabetes, stroke, and acute heart disease.

Part of the problem with prevailing weight research is that it's built on a flawed measurement. The body mass index (BMI) was designed to measure weight independently of height. It does that using a simple formula: weight (in kilograms) divided by height (in meters) squared.

It makes sense that researchers and statisticians need a measure of weight that's independent of height. In fact, when I first went to work at the National Cancer Institute this simple fact seemed to have become lost among all the fancy statistics. So I actually published a few papers in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* reminding researchers how to use the BMI.

This led to a lively debate among medical researchers and scientists. We eventually titled our entry “expanding on the three limitations of body mass indices.” Ultimately, everyone agreed that there are important limitations for using the BMI.

But then they made the illogical decision to keep using BMI anyway as the index for overweight and obesity!

Why you shouldn't pay so much attention to BMI

A BMI calculation that works for one population, gender, or individual may not work well for another. But to make it simple, medical research and practice use the same formula for everyone, and these numbers have become the standards for comparison.

So, there's nothing magic, or even precisely accurate, about the way

the BMI is now being used. It's nothing more sophisticated than a measurement of weight and height.

As a medical research tool in larger studies, the fashion is now that scientists are using it to look for larger trends. And often, they regard BMI with “tunnel vision.” Instead of seeing it for what it is: a *roughly measured* estimate of overall health.

Here's another problem with BMI. Even though it tells you if a person weighs more than other people of the same height, it doesn't tell you *why*. Are those extra pounds fat or lean muscle? Did the extra weight come from a healthy diet containing nuts, low-fat dairy, whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and omega 3-rich foods? Or did it come from junk food and “empty” calories?

Unfortunately our healthcare system doesn't allow doctors and nurses the time they need to *accurately* measure what matters: Fitness levels—*not weight!* All it takes is an inexpensive, non-invasive and easy-to-use caliper. If only our healthcare providers knew how to use them. . .

A little extra weight can be healthy

Staying healthy and staying thin are *not* the same thing. The Aerobics Center Longitudinal Study recently made this clear. The study was huge—it looked at 14,000 men (average age 44 years) and followed them for more than 11 years. Higher fitness levels had far greater impact on death rates from heart diseases and from all causes than did lower weight. In fact, men who maintained their fitness level had a nearly one-

Continued on page 8...

third lower death rate. And if you stay fit, you'll maintain healthy muscle mass. Which means you'll have a little "extra" body weight.

But that doesn't tell the whole story of why extra weight has benefits. Body fat may protect you by affecting your body's beneficial biochemicals and hormones. It certainly provides extra padding to protect organs from traumatic injuries—which can mean the difference between life and death. Plus, in times of illness, some caloric reserve may give you the nutritional support you need as you heal.

Are the statistics telling the truth?

Discussion of the health risks of obesity is everywhere. Does that make doctors more aggressive when treating overweight people? Are they more concerned about patient health or medical liability when a person is overweight? If so, that could skew the numbers.

Another possible area of confusion

is age. One study showed that three years after invasive treatment for coronary heart disease, overweight or obese men had a lower risk for death than normal-weight or underweight men. But the obese patients were often younger than the slimmer patients. More and more young people are obese—and since younger age is associated with lower death rates, the two risk factors may be getting crossed up.

In all things, moderation

Is it possible that the health benefits of a few extra pounds can be explained away by any or all of these factors?


Maybe.

Or maybe the simple moderation associated with moderate overweight has something to do with it. Not so long ago, and for thousands of years before, it was considered healthy and desirable to have some meat on your bones. It was just common sense that being underweight was "sickly."

And decades ago science proved that being underweight is associated with higher death rates—compared to the happy middle.

The evolution of society's thoughts about "body image" has drastically altered what is considered a "normal" body weight, statistics aside.

Time and time again, common sense tells us what we need in order to be healthy and happy. It's not some arbitrary formula. And it's certainly not deprivation. **It's moderation.**

Moderation in all things is the key to health and happiness. And happiness itself may be a key. Who can be happy while frozen in front of a mirror, obsessing about body image and pants size? Who can be happy when counting every calorie, day in and day out? Eating should be one of the most normative and enjoyable human behaviors. But we make it a struggle. Living in constant calorie-cutting mode not only isn't fun—it isn't healthy. 

NEWS BRIEF

From spy novel to medicine shelf

A natural substance's secret potential revealed ...

The natural medicine I'm about to reveal seems more fitting for a spy novel than a health newsletter. So of course, I couldn't resist sharing the news...I love a good story!

Turns out the "invisible ink" George Washington used to write letters to spies during the Revolutionary War has been hiding an impressive secret for centuries. In fact, the organic acid found in many plants—including gallnuts, sumac, witch hazel, tea leaves, and oak bark—has a history dating back to the Roman empire.

Gallic acid, made from growths on oak trees (galls), was an important part of ink for centuries in Europe. It also was used to reveal secret messages in manuscripts—clearing off the top "decoy" layer and revealing hidden manuscripts underneath.

But now its own hidden messages are being revealed. Science suggests that gallic acid has antifungal and antiviral properties. It also acts as an antioxidant.

Even more impressive, gallic acid may be toxic to cancer cells, but it doesn't harm healthy cells. New research sheds more light onto how gallic acid is able to act against cancer. In experimental cell research, gallic acid inhibited tumor cell growth, facilitated the "programmed cell death" of cancer cells, and prevented the growth of new blood vessels to supply tumor cells.

Perhaps gallic acid's most interesting history is yet to come...

Gallic acid supplements haven't yet become mainstream, but it is abundant in a number of foods. Tree nuts (walnuts, for instance), raspberries, hot cocoa, and both green and red bush tea all provide solid doses of gallic acid. There would be no harm in adding more of those to your diet while we wait to see what more science shows us about this intriguing substance.