

East Meets West

By Richard Esquivel, L.Ac., MTCM and Marvin Masada, M.D.

This is the third in a series of articles designed to compare and contrast Eastern and Western therapies to common clinical conditions. This month's article will focus on diabetes.

Background

Type II diabetes (or adult-onset diabetes) is a serious threat to the health of Americans. In this disease, the body is unable to produce sufficient amounts of insulin or to properly utilize insulin, the hormone produced by the body that regulates blood sugar (glucose). Over time, the excessive levels of glucose in uncontrolled diabetes can cause damage to the body--including blindness, kidney failure, heart attacks, strokes, nerve damage, sexual dysfunction, limb amputations, and compromised wound healing.

Unfortunately, diabetes is an insidious disease on the rise and many Americans remain largely undiagnosed until much of the damage has already been done. Cases of diabetes have doubled in the last fifteen years and are expected to double again in the next fifteen years according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). One CDC scientist in a recent article estimates that one-third of the children born in the year 2000 will develop this disease during their lifetime. The odds increase for those in high-risk groups such as African-Americans and Latinos, which have a fifty percent chance of developing the disease.

Why is the prevalence of diabetes on the rise?

The risk of diabetes increases with obesity and lack of exercise. Ninety percent of type II diabetics are overweight. The majority of type II diabetics are over 40 years of age. However, we are seeing a shocking increase in diabetes in teenagers, as obesity is more common in childhood and we have become more sedentary (e.g. playing video games). Simple regular exercise and moderate weight loss can go a long way in warding off this disease. A study two years ago found that walking 30 minutes a day for most days of the week and losing some weight helped to cut the risk of developing diabetes by up to 58 percent.

Chinese medical treatment for diabetes

There are numerous clinical studies done in China showing the efficacy of both acupuncture and herbal medicine in treating diabetes. There are a number of Chinese and Western herbs which have an ability to lower blood-glucose by aiding in the body's sensitivity to insulin. In fact, glucophage, one of the first medications to increase insulin sensitivity, was derived from French lilac. American ginseng and corosolic acid (extracted from the Asian tree Queen's Crepe Myrtle) also have been shown to have a hypoglycemic effect presumably by activating glucose transport. Again, in any diabetes treatment program, careful attention must be paid to one's weight, diet, and proper exercise.

Western medical treatment for diabetes

Many medications are currently available to treat diabetes, and new treatments are being developed, including inhaled insulin. However with the rise in the number of diabetics, much of the focus has shifted to preventing or to delaying the onset of this disease. Two studies (HOPE and LIFE studies) looking at the protective effects of blood pressure medications (ACE inhibitors and angiotensin receptor blockers) on cardiovascular risk, incidentally saw a significant reduction of diabetes onset. In a study treating a high risk group with a diabetes medication called troglitazone (TRIPOD study), the progression to diabetes was reduced from 12.4% to 5.3% per year. Using a weight loss drug (orlistat) and lifestyle changes (XENDOS study), the overall risk of developing diabetes was reduced by 36%. Other studies with combinations of the drugs are ongoing. Paraphrasing a saying borrowed from the East, “a good doctor can treat disease, a superior doctor can prevent it.”

Richard Esquivel is a licensed acupuncturist, trained in traditional Chinese medicine. He practices in Evergreen at Healing Touch Acupuncture Clinic, 2724 Aborn Rd. (at White Rd.), San Jose, CA 95121. ph: 408-528-7024, email:

richard@essentialhealthcare.com

Marvin Masada is a medical doctor, board certified in family practice. He practices in Evergreen at Evergreen Family Health Center, 3151 S. White Rd., ste. 104, San Jose, CA 95148. ph: 408-274-1654.