

Naturopathic approach helps workers get healthy

Canada Post study finds risk of heart disease reduced

By Erin Ellis, Vancouver Sun April 30, 2013

Out-of-shape postal workers who saw a naturopathic doctor seven times over the course of a year were more likely to lose weight and lower their blood pressure than a control group taking a business-as-usual approach, according to a new study.

The research, published Monday in the Canadian Medical Association Journal, followed the progress of Canada Post employees deemed to be at risk for heart disease.

Participants in Vancouver, Edmonton and Toronto weren't prescribed any special naturopathic remedies, but some took omega-3 fatty acids, soluble fibre, coenzyme Q10 or plant sterols - all commonly available supplements used to promote heart health.

Serenity Aberdour, a naturopathic doctor at Vancouver's Horizon Naturopathic clinic, met with the Vancouver workers in the study at Canada Post's downtown handling station. By far her biggest recommendation was switching to healthier foods and being active for at least half an hour a day, she said in a telephone interview.

"There was definitely no magic pill, no one supplement that was given to everybody. It was more to look at the effects of naturopathic medicine as a system and working one-on-one with people to help them make those changes," said Aberdour.

Participants across the country were divided into two groups: 122 people in a control group who continued to see their family doctors as usual, and 124 who added seven visits to a naturopathic doctors over the course of a year - a one-hour initial session followed by six half-hour visits.

All participants in the 2008-10 study had a relatively high risk of developing heart disease, with 55 per cent of the participants displaying metabolic syndrome, defined as the presence of three of these five conditions: abdominal obesity, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, high levels of triglyceride (fat) or sugar in their blood. All were encouraged to lose weight - five to ten pounds or 2.3 to 4.6 kg - through exercise and diet.

Both groups saw health improvements, but 48 per cent of the control group still had metabolic syndrome after a year, compared to 31 per cent of the naturopathic group, a difference of 17 percentage points.

The study did not track which therapies were recommended or followed - making it impossible to say exactly why one group was more successful than the other. The study's authors also

noted that critics will say it is flawed because it didn't compare the effects of seven extra doctor's visits with the effects of seven extra consultations with a naturopathic doctor.

Aberdour attributes the relative success of the naturopathic group to the individual counselling and intermittent testing they received.

"We reran the tests twice after the initial screening. When people have something measurable they can see that's changing, it's more encouraging. Risk of heart disease doesn't have any symptoms so it's not the same as being in pain and being motivated by that."

Research on naturopathic treatments isn't typical fare for traditional medical journals, but Dr. Matthew Stanbrook, deputy editor of the Canadian Medical Association Journal, said in an accompanying editorial that rigorous research in the area is welcome. He stopped far short of saying that the study reached any firm conclusions, however.

Yet the overall conclusion that naturopathic care can help patients who want to lower their cardiac risk seems valid, he added in a telephone interview from Toronto.

"I think this opens a window on what the future might look like ... If (naturopathic doctors) want to take on this role perhaps they could be partners with the health care system in this very important aspect of preventive health care."

The study's lead author, Dugald Seely, a naturopathic doctor and founder of the Ottawa Integrative Cancer Centre, said the research is the fourth trial sponsored by Canada Post and the Canadian Union of Postal Workers with a focus on improving employee health.

Although the bills for naturopathic treatments are largely paid by individuals in Canada - except for employees with generous extended medical benefits - Seely says he has upcoming research that indicates an overall cost benefit to society in terms of reduced use of the health care system and prescription medications, and fewer lost days at work.

CUPW members can be reimbursed for up to \$480 in naturopathic treatments per year, according the union's Vancouver branch.

The diet advice offered to participants who saw a naturopath was based on the Mediterranean and Portfolio dietary plans. Go online to vancouver.sun.com for links.

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