

CAM Concepts

CAM Concept of Immune Enhancement (Naturopathy)

(Disclaimer: This mini-review is intended to explain this naturopathic concept to allopathic clinicians and not to present a detailed review of the evidence. Some key references are provided for the reader who desires more in-depth information).

Theory

Naturopathic physicians (ND's) believe that many diseases can be prevented and treated by promoting the body's ability to heal itself through an optimally functioning immune system. Furthermore, they believe immune system function can be enhanced by providing or applying certain therapeutic agents such as dietary and botanical supplements, psychological support, and/or physiotherapy modalities such as hyperthermia (the application of external heat with the intent to increase internal body temperature). Immune system enhancement therapy is very commonly applied in patients with upper respiratory infections such as otitis, sinusitis, pharyngitis, laryngitis, and bronchitis. Other types of infections where immune enhancement is commonly applied include herpes, vaginitis, and urinary tract infections. Non-infectious diseases where this concept may be applied include chronic fatigue syndrome, auto-immune diseases, cancer treatment support therapy, or cancer recurrence prevention therapy.

Practical Application

In the case of a viral upper respiratory infection (URI), an ND will likely approach the problem from several angles; removing obstacles to cure such as poor diet, providing symptom relief such as an analgesic gargle, providing dietary supplements intended to stimulate the immune system and promote the body's ability to fight the virus, and hydrotherapy intended to increase body temperature which results in enhanced immune function and decreased viral replication. Examples of dietary supplements commonly used for promoting immune response in URI's include vitamins A and C, zinc gluconate, shiitake mushrooms, thymus extract, glycyrrhiza, and echinacea. An example of hydrotherapy commonly used in URI's is the "wet sock" treatment. The patient goes to bed with woolen socks that are wet. The body's response to this treatment is to produce heat and increase circulation, both thought to be immune enhancing. In addition, increased body temperature reduces the rate of viral replication. It is believed that by utilizing these kinds of therapies, the course of the URI can be made milder and shorter in duration.

Additional Reading

Pizzorno, Joseph – Total Wellness, 1998, Prima Publishing, Chapter 4, pages 29-86
Werbach, Melvin, Jeffrey Moss – Textbook of Nutritional Medicine, 1999, Redwing Books

Werbach, Melvin, Murray, Michael – Botanical Influences on Illness, second edition, 1994, Redwing Books