

Can vitamins replace diabetic drugs?

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By Pat Shellenbarger

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GRAND RAPIDS -- The pain in Rosemary Sousley's feet had gotten so bad she could barely walk into the next room. Knowing it was caused by her diabetes and perhaps the chemotherapy she underwent for breast cancer a few years ago didn't help. Neither did the eight Tylenol she was taking every day. So when her podiatrist, Dr. Michael David, invited her to join a study to determine if a formula of vitamins and minerals could reduce diabetes-related pain, the 68-year-old Middleville woman agreed.

Within two weeks, the pain in her feet had subsided enough she began cutting back on the Tylenol. Within a month, she was down to one Tylenol a day, and "now I'm at the point of taking two or three a week." The pain is virtually gone, Sousley said. "It's a warm awareness," she said, "but it's not painful." The group of Grand Rapids doctors who conceived and oversaw the study said the other participants had similar improvement in a nerve disorder common among diabetics called peripheral neuropathy, the death of nerves in the feet and hands, characterized by a burning pain and numbness.

At the beginning of the study last February, the 30 patients were asked to rate their pain on a scale of one to 10. After four weeks, on average, they reported a 30 percent reduction in pain. After eight weeks, they said their pain was cut in half. After 12 weeks, their pain showed a 63 percent improvement. "It was amazing," said Dr. Mark Gostine, a Grand Rapids pain specialist. "Some people got rid of their pain completely." The idea for the study grew out of a dinner conversation between Gostine and Dr. Larry Pawl, a Grand Rapids cancer specialist. Many of his patients on chemotherapy suffer neuropathy as a side effect of their treatments, Pawl said. He knew Gostine was a big believer in natural supplements, so he asked him if vitamins or other natural substances might help.

"It was more of an off-hand remark by Larry, which turned into a challenge for me," Gostine recalled. "I'm a big believer in nutrition. I always tell people, 'It's not what you eat; it's what you don't eat that's hurting you.'"

Gostine began on a year-long search through thousands of medical articles, looking for which micro-nutrients might work. He and Pawl narrowed them to five (N-acetyl-cysteine, alpha-lipoic-acid, L-carnitine, vitamin C and selenium) and contracted with a pharmaceutical company to manufacture pills with that formula.

Pawl offered the supplements to his cancer patients and noticed it seemed especially helpful for those who also were diabetic. Thus, they undertook the six-month study, hired a researcher and recruited patients through Foot & Ankle Specialists of West Michigan. They published their findings in the this month's issue of the Journal of Practical Pain Management. Not only did the supplements help reduce pain, but also the numbness, which can lead to injuries and infections for diabetics. Gostine conceded the study did not use a control group of patients receiving a placebo for comparison, but said he is convinced supplements work for most patients.

The apparent success of the Grand Rapids study attracted the attention of Celgene Corp., a multi-national pharmaceutical company, and Cleveland Clinic is considering a more-scientific study to see if the supplements can help reduce neuropathy for cancer patients. Gostine and Pawl, meanwhile, formed a company called Terraceuticals, created a Web site, www.neuropathysolutions.com, selling a supplement they call NeuropathyRx for diabetics, and another Web site, www.chemocenter.com, selling a slightly different formula called Chemolyte for cancer patients.

Even though the study ended a few months ago, Sousley continues taking the supplement twice a day. "If I stop, I'll be back using Tylenol," she said. "All I can tell you is it works."

Send e-mail to the author: pshellenbarger@grpress.com