Curb The Herb

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Women with the double whammy of HIV and recurrent genital herpes have been known to roll their eyes when advised to avoid stress—long viewed as a major cause of those itching, burning outbreaks: “Sure, doc, I’ll have no problem leading a completely copacetic life from now on.” Well, cynical sisters, retreating to a monastery may not be necessary after all. University of California at San Francisco researchers report that short-term anxiety (seven days or less)—a bad day at work, a distressing plane flight, a pet emergency—didn’t increase eruptions in 58 women with a long history of recurrent herpes. But long-term stressors—ongoing financial difficulties, trouble finding a job, a family member with chronic health problems—boosted the rate of outbreaks substantially. Similarly, while no herpes promotion occurred after temporarily increased levels of negative mood (anxiety, depression or anger), monthly peak levels of anxiety for each person were likely to be followed by an attack So, gals with HIV and herpes, don’t stress over (a little) stress. (Guys, the researchers caution against applying these results to your own case of herpes, since theirs was a woman-only study and the underlying mechanism by which stress causes outbreaks remains only dimly understood.) High anxiety, of course, is another matter, and may call for counseling and stress management, plus anti-herpes meds such as acyclovir (Zovirax) or valacyclovir (Valtrex)—or even a trip to the local ashram.

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