Hep Help Hurray!

Make your sick liver shine with ancient wisdom and a dose of cleansing herbs

December 1, 1999 By Bob Roehr

A silk scroll from a tomb of China's Han dynasty records the first description of hepatitis and its treatment. Now, some 26 centuries later, Bao-en Wang, MD, of Beijing Friendship Hospital, is examining the rich trove of traditional Chinese medicine with the eyes of a modern scientist. At a recent National Institutes of Health conference in Bethesda, Maryland, Wang joined other researchers and practitioners who shared their latest findings about alternative treatments for liver disease, a vexing problem for many HIVers.

Home-Grown Combos

The ancient news is good. One traditional Chinese 10-plant combo—known as **Herbal Medicine 861**—not only normalized liver enzymes in three-quarters of the 84 hepatitis B (HBV) patients enrolled in Wang's six-month study, but also seemed to slow liver scarring and in some cases even reverse it (a feat previously thought impossible), leading to liver recovery.

Japanese traditional medicine may also work against HBV. Lab studies found that a boiled-herb combo called **Hochu-ekki-to (TJ-41)** appeared to cause apoptosis, or induced cell death, in liver cells made cancerous by HBV. And in a test-tube study of hepatitis C virus (HCV) treatment, Japan's **Ninjin-youmei-to (TJ-108)** prevented infection of new cells. A study of Tokyo patients found results comparable to those of interferon therapy—roughly 25 percent HCV clearance—with fewer side effects.

These Chinese and Japanese formulas are available through some U.S. practitioners trained in Chinese and Japanese medicine. But a dose of caution is called for: You *can* take too much of a natural product, and some herbs may also interact badly with pharmaceuticals. Talk with your doctor before heading East.

Herbs and Nutes to Root For

Asians weren't the only enthusiasts of anti-hep alternatives at the NIH conference. Yankee Andrew Rubman, a naturopathic physician from Southbury, Connecticut, also backs an "aggressive natural immune-enhancing program to help the liver process the debris" from fighting infections. The

following nutrients and herbs (available at health food stores and buyers clubs) have been shown to offer benefits for liver problems, whether of viral or drug origin.

Vitamins B-6 and **B-12** are key for general maintenance of liver function. Several other nutrients boost levels of glutathione, which liver stress depletes. In one small study, **N-acetyl cysteine**, or **NAC**, when combined with interferon, normalized liver enzymes in people with HBV previously unresponsive to interferon alone. **Glutamine** is an amino acid essential to a healthy liver. As little as 400 international units (IU) of **vitamin E** twice a day can reduce elevated liver enzymes by 60 percent in HCVers, according to a Mayo Clinic study. Other important liver-strengthening antioxidants include **vitamin C** and **alpha-lipoic acid**.

Among the herbal liver cleansers: **Silymarin** (**milk thistle extract**) inhibits inflammation and reduces insulin resistance in people with cirrhosis (severe liver scarring). **Dandelion** and **artichoke** encourage the flow of bile from the liver. **Glycyrrhizin (licorice-root extract)**, an approved hepatitis treatment in Japan, was recently found to keep HBV particles from binding in the liver and can inhibit the growth of HCV-related cancer cells. But see your doctor for warnings about who should avoid this extract and for necessary monitoring.

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