

Vail Daily

Health for body, mind and soul

A deeper look into progressive health trends

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The space is only slightly cramped in Dr. Deborah Wiancek's small office. Amber (a pseudonym to protect her medical history) is seated opposite Dr. Wiancek, tapping her right foot as red blotches spread on her neck and chest, betraying edgy nerves. Stomach problems plague Amber almost daily, she says. This is combined with sinus problems that flare up every few weeks, and migraines that have been steadily increasing in frequency. Despite all this, Amber hasn't seen a doctor (outside of her gynecologist) in over five years. She's a skeptic in every sense of the word. She's wary of traditional medicine - no doctor has ever really helped her, she says: they've botched surgeries, once cutting out an "extra" tendon in her hand that wasn't superfluous after all; they've listened to her symptoms and either prescribed pills or have passed her along to a specialist, and they've never actually made her feel better. "I don't like to see traditional doctors because they don't seem to try to get to the root of the problem," Amber says. "You're in and out in 10 minutes. It seems I'm always passed on to another specialist and the problem is never really solved." But health problems are having a serious effect on her life. The migraines can make work miserable and nearly impossible. Some days she has to turn off the lights in the office; the glare makes the pain behind her eyes become acute. The pain in her stomach was growing more intense. Amber eventually decided something needed to be done. "I finally got to a point where something needed to change," Amber says. "I was interested in what path a natural doctor would take and how an alternative doctor would approach some of my health concerns." So Amber has come to see Dr. Wiancek, a naturopathic physician with offices in Riverwalk in Edwards. Naturopathic physicians are general practitioners trained as specialists in natural medicine. They hold a Doctor of Naturopathic Medicine (N.D.) degree from a four-year, graduate-level naturopathic medical university. Dr. Wiancek says she strives to identify and treat the cause of her patient's problems, not just mask their symptoms. She, like all naturopathic doctors, endeavors to educate her patients on preventative medicine as well. The overall goal is prevention through a healthy lifestyle and education. Conventional medicine, on the other hand, tends to diagnose and treat the disease after it's already present. "The biggest difference is, I look at what's causing the problem and I treat from the cause, rather than treating from the symptoms," Dr. Wiancek says. "The people I tend to have come to me are at their wits end, they have gone to 10 different doctors and they don't like taking the drugs. Nobody's giving them information on what the actual problem is." Dr. Wiancek is there for people like Amber, one of a growing number of Americans who have turned to alternative medicine when conventional medicine and doctors have failed them. Dr. Wiancek spent 20 years in traditional medicine as an X-ray technician in Denver before deciding to become a naturopathic physician. She worked in Denver at St. Anthony's Hospital, Rose Medical Center, and The Children's Hospital. "I really didn't like the way people were being treated; they had 10 minutes with a doctor and for each doctor, they'd get a different diagnosis according to their symptoms." After four years of pre-med at Metro State College in Denver, Dr. Wiancek enrolled in one of the four professionally recognized universities of naturopathic medicine in the U.S.: John Bastyr University in Seattle, Wash. There she took the same classes as a medical doctor and many classes that were taught by medical doctors: gynecology, dermatology, gastroenterology, obstetrics, immunology and others. The American Association of Naturopathic Physicians advises seeing a practitioner, like Dr. Wiancek, who has passed the board exams and graduated from one of four schools that offer four-year degrees. Both physicians and holistic practitioners agree that in order to minimize risk and maximize benefits, consumers need to be sure to seek out a qualified provider. The National Institute of Health recently did a study that showed only 12 percent of those using alternative therapies had sought care from a licensed practitioner. Naturopathic physicians do a lot of the same things a traditional doctor does: they check blood pressure, do pap smears, give abdominal exams and use the same type of lab tests - checking cholesterol, kidney and liver function. The difference is in the treatment. "I treat using only natural medicine," Dr. Wiancek says. "All I use is homeopathy, botanical medicine, supplements and nutrition, so I am among the most educated physician available in natural medicine." The danger zone But Dr. Wiancek's natural and botanical medicines are coming under increased scrutiny from the Food and Drug Administration and other health officials. About 30,000 products are marketed as vitamins or dietary supplements in the United States, making the industry worth more than \$17 billion per year, according to a Colorado State University study. It is estimated that more than half of all

Americans take a dietary supplement. Fifteen million of those people are also taking some sort of prescription medicine at the same time. Combinations between prescription drugs and supplements can be dangerous, if not deadly. Naturopathic physicians say that Saint John's Wort, for example, shouldn't be combined with anti-depressants. Kava-kava can cause problems for people with liver damage, and pregnant women should not take black Cohosh because it can bring on miscarriages. Patricia Kendall, Ph.D., is a professor and extension specialist in the Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition at Colorado State University, believes that the FDA should further regulate dietary supplements. "I am in favor of (more regulation). Currently, there is little oversight regarding what is said about or in supplements," she says. "Having FDA regulation will enhance truth in labeling." Representatives of the FDA say there are other, unknown dangers to supplements and herbs, and more regulation is necessary. And some medical doctors have doubts about the effectiveness of supplements. "Right now you can put out anything you want, and as long as you call it a supplement, there's no oversight over what you're doing, and I think that's insane," says Dr. Wagner Schorr, M.D. a doctor of internal medicine at Colorado Mountain Medical. Dr. Schorr also says there's some un-tapped potential when it comes to vitamins and alternative medicine. He and Wiancek agree that the two fields can compliment each other - but they both also recommend that people are wary of what supplements they take and where they buy them. "The sale of expensive vitamins is an effective way to biopsy money from consumer's pockets into the pocket of those selling the vitamins," Dr. Schorr says. The FDA currently regulates dietary supplements under a different set of regulations than those covering "conventional" foods and drug products (prescription and over-the-counter). Under the Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act of 1994, the dietary supplement manufacturer is responsible for ensuring the quality and safety of the product before it reaches the market. The FDA is then responsible for taking action against any supplement that is unsafe after it reaches the consumer market. As a result, oftentimes the manufacturing standards for quality, potency and effectiveness are inconsistent. The FDA is now proposing new labeling and manufacturing standards for all dietary supplements. According to the FDA's website, fda.gov, the standards would "establish new standards or 'current good manufacturing practices' to help reduce risks associated with adulterated or mis-branded dietary supplement products." The proposed rules would establish industry-wide standards to ensure supplements are manufactured "consistently as to identify purity, quality, strength and composition." Manufacturers will also be responsible for determining that any "representations or claims made about their products are substantiated by adequate evidence to show that they are not false or misleading." In recent years, several private laboratories (see consumerlab.com) have found that a substantial number of dietary supplement products that were analyzed did not, in fact, contain the amount of dietary ingredients claimed on the products label. As a result of this and other manufacturing problems that have been associated with dietary supplements, the FDA is proposing labeling and manufacturing standards for dietary supplements. "I think that there are two sides to the FDA regulating supplements," Dr. Wiancek says. "I'm worried (supplements) will be harder to find and that some would be offered by prescription only so (people) are going to have to go to a doctor to get them. On the other side, 50 percent of the supplements on the shelf don't have in them what they claim. I think if the FDA does regulate (the industry) the supplements will become very expensive. The more testing we do on natural products and the more regulation we do, the more increase in price we'll see." Last year the National Institute of Health released a survey revealing that 36 percent of adults in the U.S. use some form of alternative medicine. When vitamins and the use of prayer for health reasons were included in the classification, that percentage skyrocketed to 62 percent. Dr. Wiancek would like to see the integration of traditional and natural medicine where, in the end, the patient's needs are put above all else. She realizes that people will still need surgery and concedes that there's definitely still a place for MD's. "Some people will need surgery, with no way around it. But with something like a knee surgery, where the person tore their ACL or something, we can work a lot with reducing the inflammation, and reducing the pain. I think we could do so much working together." Oftentimes if Dr. Wiancek feels a patient needs further tests, she's more than willing to refer them to a local internist like local Dr. Jack Eck or Dr. Schorr. The diagnosis Back in Dr. Wiancek's office, Amber is being quizzed about all aspects of her health, from her sleep patterns to her menstrual cycle and her bowel habits. She wants to know about Amber's exercise induced asthma, her lower-back pain, and an ankle she sprained years ago. She's not just concerned about the symptoms that have gotten bad enough to bring Amber in; she wants to know about all aspects of Amber's health. In the end, Dr. Wiancek feels that Amber might be suffering from dairy, wheat and/or citrus allergies. She prescribes a 14-day allergy elimination diet where Amber will avoid all foods that fall into those three categories. She also puts her on digestive enzymes called "Biogest" to help Amber digest her food better, and to enable her to take vitamins without feeling nauseous, something she's previously been unable to do. "What happens is we have hydrochloric acid in the stomach," Dr. Wiancek says, "people who have had food allergies all their life, they lose that acid, because it's there to digest the food and it can't digest those foods that you're allergic to. We have to build it back up again." After giving Amber an abdominal examination, she thinks that her liver might be congested and prescribes Hepacaps, twice daily, to clean out her liver. Last, Dr. Wiancek wants Amber to take one tablespoon of organic flax seed oil daily to help the redness in her cheeks. The two schedule an appointment for two weeks later. Early

results

Two weeks later Amber returns to Dr. Wiancek's office. Amber has been fastidious about her diet: no citrus, wheat or dairy. The Vail Trail watched her closely, and she says she didn't cheat once. She has had good reason to be faithful however: her stomach problems have all but disappeared and she hasn't had a migraine during the past two weeks. Whereas vitamins used to make her nauseous and usually didn't stay down, the digestive enzymes appear to have worked. She's been able to take her vitamins and supplements without feeling ill.

"Yeah, I am glad I went to see Dr. Wiancek," Amber says. "I haven't had the stomachaches at all since I started the special two-week elimination diet. And I haven't had any headaches either."

Now that Amber's symptoms have cleared, Dr. Wiancek feels it's time to reintroduce the foods, one at a time, in order to see if the symptoms return.

"On day 15, start with wheat, have a lot of it that day. If you get a stomachache, or get bloated, or any type of symptom, you should stop the wheat, see if the symptom clears. Then we pretty much know you're reacting to wheat."

Amber may have to stay away from wheat products (or citrus, or dairy, depending on what causes the symptoms to reoccur) for three to six months. The longer the time period, the more likely Amber's immune system won't recognize it as a problem anymore and will cease reacting to it with her various symptoms.

"After that period of time, you could probably get away with eating it two-to-three times per week without having symptoms."

For now, Amber is feeling much better. She's slowly reintroducing the foods and getting a better idea of what her diet is going to look like for the next few months.

"This diet has definitely made me more aware of what I eat and I feel like I'm on a path of a healthier lifestyle," she said. "I've had to give up some of my favorite foods for a while, but I have felt much better for it. It's a catch-22, I guess."

For one patient, at least, Dr. Wiancek has been able to do what no M.D. has done in quite some time: make Amber feel healthy again. VT

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Tom Boyd contributed to this story.

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