

As a doctor, I get to learn the views of many patients regarding medication and other medical interventions. Increasingly, patients tend to be concerned about the possible toxic effects of pharmaceutical products. This is reasonable, as any drug can be harmful. But along with the view that drugs are dangerous comes the prevailing view that natural products and natural treatments are invariably safe. The opinion I am often hearing goes even further, suggesting that nature itself is nurturing and safe, and that perhaps if we simply "leave well enough alone" the body will take care of itself.

I often feel this longing for nature myself. We live in a world that is increasingly complex, intense, technological and cluttered. The more computers and cables and satellite dishes, the more appealing nature looks. I have always loved the outdoors, so I can understand how my patients feel.

But in fact, they are wrong. There is nothing nurturing or tender about nature. Nature simply doesn't care one way or the other. Remember that if Mother Nature is an author (by the way, the fact that we have made an anthropomorphic mother out of nature expresses clearly how we look for nurturing

there), she wrote the book on survival of the fittest. Hurricane Mitch is natural. Rattlesnake venom is natural.

Nor is it correct to think that letting the body take care of itself will necessarily lead to a good outcome. During most of our 4 million years on earth, the most likely reason for our ancestors' blood pressure to drop was loss of blood; let's say a saber tooth tiger bite. Because bleeding and low blood pressure are fatal if they are not quickly reversed, natural selection over eons allowed us to develop a complex, and natural defense against this situation. Our kidneys, which filter the blood, have sensors for detecting blood pressure. When our ancestors' blood pressure dropped, their kidneys "knew" they must be bleeding. Their kidneys, therefore, released hormones that caused their blood vessels to clamp down, stopping the bleeding and raising blood pressure. At the same time, the kidneys released other hormones that caused the retention of water and sodium. This helped keep blood pressure up until more blood could be made.

These days, there aren't a lot of saber tooth tigers around, and one of the more common reasons for blood pressure to be low is heart disease. A heart



## The nature of Nature

attack weakens the heart, so it sends out less blood, and pressure falls. The problem is that the kidneys, when blood pressure falls, always make the same assumption: saber tooth tiger. They therefore raise blood pressure, which makes the failing heart work harder, and retain salt and water, which overwhelms the failing heart entirely, causing fluid to back up into the lungs. This condition, called congestive heart failure, is lethal unless treated with medication. The medication that is life-saving in congestive heart failure works by opposing everything the body is doing naturally.

The point here is not that nature is in any way bad, but rather that nature may not always do what is best for your health. We live a lot longer than our ancestors ever did, and that in itself has created situations nature is not prepared to deal with.

There is a role for nature in health and health care, but nature is not always the answer. Be open-minded if and when your doctor recommends medication. Ask about risks, but consider potential benefits. It's often safer to take a prescribed medication than not to. When "Mother Nature" makes you think of a warm embrace, remember that this "mother" for eons has

told her kids: goodbye, good luck, and may the strongest survive.

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*Preventive Medicine Column*

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