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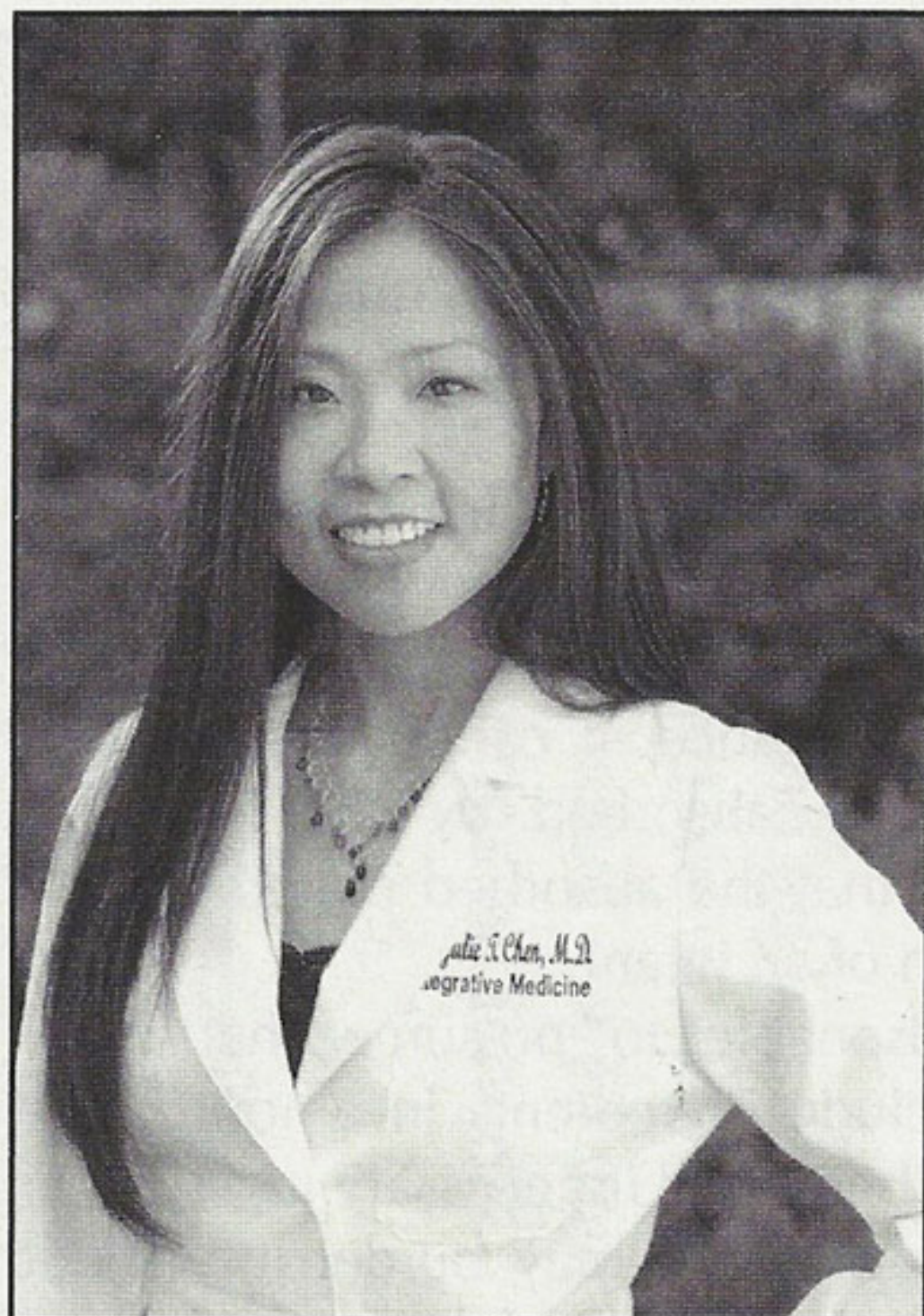


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# Integrative Medicine Perspective by Dr. Julie

by Julie T. Chen, MD  
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## Are You Spending Money Putting Toxins in Your Body?

When you purchase your supplements, does it ever cross your mind that you could be spending money on heavy metal toxins that would contaminate your body and physiology? For most of my patients it does not. That is why they are frequently shocked to find heavy metal toxicity in their lab results and are usually baffled as to the cause.

Far too often, I am finding mild levels of heavy metal toxicity in my patients. When I have them stop their supplements for a few weeks to months, their levels normalize. It is difficult to pinpoint which supplements are the culprits, especially if the regimen includes multiple supplements and herbs and some of these are usually in blends. This is why it is important for patients and physicians to examine brands, and even the various types of supplements within a brand, so as to become familiar with products that are consistently safe.

While heavy metal toxicity treatment regimens can be complicated, it is still important to think about potential simple treatments along with other modalities such as chelation therapy or other detoxification treatments. All too often, the simple concept of removing an offending agent is overlooked, and that minutia of therapy could have a tremendous health impact on the patient. When we take the time to listen to the details of our patients' history, frequently, they will tell us where the offending agent is coming from. My patient J. P. is a perfect example of the idea that, in mild cases, sometimes doing less can be as helpful as doing more.

J. P.,\* aged 75, presented in my clinic for mildly elevated arsenic levels detected in blood and urine. He was referred to me by his primary care doctor due to transient peripheral neuropathic symptoms of numbness and tingling in fingers that had not occurred in the past. He does not have diabetes or carpal tunnel history and is retired without excessive use of computer or typing. He had experienced the transient intermittent numbness and tingling in fingertips without

weakness for about 2 weeks. His review of systems was otherwise negative.

He had been on his supplements for many years but had recently switched brands on all of them since various brands were on sale at the local store. He denied any other neurological deficits, and the tingling and numbness were in all fingers and had never occurred before. He had no prior cardiac or neurological disorder history. He was not a smoker and did not drink alcohol. He still worked regularly in his garden at home.

He said that his wife did not have similar symptoms and they ate the same food and worked in the garden together. His wife did not take his supplements because "she doesn't believe in this stuff."

His vital signs and exam were unremarkable except for mild decreased subjective sensation in the tips of all his fingers from pinprick and light touch. His toes were normal. Phalen's and Tinel's signs were negative for carpal tunnel syndrome. His neurological exam and nail exam were otherwise negative.

I sent him for blood and urine heavy metal screening test again to confirm abnormal levels, and he again returned with mild positive elevation for arsenic in both blood and urine levels. At the first visit, I asked him to stop all supplements and we discussed potential chelation therapy. My initial thoughts were to start him on chelation therapy and have him worked up for other potentially concerning conditions as well, but he wanted to hold off. He had already had fasting blood glucose levels checked, and his primary care doctor had scheduled him for a nerve conduction study in the upcoming weeks.

He was persistent about waiting on chelation therapy and wanted to see if his levels would normalize off supplements. We had also discussed possibilities for environmental exposure and were looking into potential environmental medicine evaluation if the need should arise. He was given



a repeat lab slip for him to get labs done 2 to 3 weeks after stopping supplements, with the caveat that he return to see me and his primary care doctor in the interim if symptoms worsened or new ones occurred.

When he returned to review labs a few weeks after stopping his supplements, he was happy to see that his blood and urine levels had normalized. He also reported that his peripheral neuropathic symptoms had resolved 1 or 2 weeks into stopping his supplements.

Although J. P. opted not to retry supplements to delineate the potential culprit(s), he wanted to go back on supplements but wanted to know which ones to try. I researched supplements with him so that he would know how to research new ones in the future. I placed him back on supplements seen not to have reports of contamination. These were also ones that I have not had issues of contamination with in other patients in the past. He was checked monthly for 4 months after the start of the supplements and he has been negative with each lab check. He has not had a return of neuropathic symptoms since then and has been happily working in his garden thereafter.

Patients are often referred to me for mild heavy metal toxicity with a referral request for chelation therapy or detoxification. However, if there are mild or nonexistent symptoms and the lab findings are mildly elevated, I will frequently have patients stop all supplements and recheck levels in 2 to 3 weeks. If levels are normalizing,

I will allow for a full wash-out period and place patients back on a regimen of supplements from those that I know are safe based on clinical experience as well as USP and ConsumerLab.com reports.

As physicians, it is imperative for us to discuss with our patients all the treatment options available for any given medical concern, which for heavy metal toxicity may mean chelation therapy and detoxification. These are indeed important aspects of treatment that need to be addressed at the forefront of therapy. However, we must not forget to listen closely to our patient's history to look for potential offending agents, because frequently the simple removal of these agents can bring significant healing and relief.

*\*Name, initials, and age have been changed for patient privacy.*

Julie T. Chen, MD, is board-certified in internal medicine and is also fellowship-trained and board-certified in integrative medicine. She has her own medical practice in San Jose, CA; is the medical director of corporation wellness at several Silicon Valley-based corporations; is on several medical expert panels of websites as well as nonprofit organizations; is a recurring monthly columnist for several national magazines; and has been featured in radio, newspaper, and magazine interviews. She incorporates healing modalities into her practice, including but not limited to medical acupuncture, Chinese scalp acupuncture, clinical hypnotherapy, strain-counterstrain osteopathic manipulations, and biofeedback.

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