

The Nursing of Heart Diseases.

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CHAPTER I.

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Next, with regard to Diet, it is somewhat strange that it is only within the last few years that this has played the important part which it deserves in the treatment of patients suffering from Heart diseases. Sufficient has been said about the effects of Dilatation of the Heart and of valvular obstruction, to explain the importance of making the diet of such patients as easily digestible as possible. The anatomical relations of the intestines to the organs of the chest, for example, make it clear that any considerable distension of the bowels must cause pressure upwards upon the diaphragm, and, therefore, more or less interference with the movements of the chest.

Anyone who has nursed patients with Heart disease who were confined to bed or the couch must have observed that they exhibited a tendency to more or less marked abdominal distension after food, and that, in consequence, there was more or less increased difficulty of breathing experienced by these patients. The simple explanation of this is that there was flatulent distension of the bowel which exercised sufficient upward pressure on the chest not only to interfere with the facility of movement of the Heart, but also, to some extent, to embarrass the action of the lungs. The nurse must also have observed in these cases the great relief that is afforded to such patients by various methods adopted to diminish or prevent such distension. For example, restricting the amount of starchy foods, such as potatoes, pastry, bread, rice, tapioca and beans, will prevent to a large extent the occurrence of such flatulence; and, on the other hand, the administration of anti-spasmodics such as Assafoetida Pills, or of carminatives such as Cardamoms or Ginger, or of absorbents like Charcoal Biscuits, will afford the patient rapid and great relief by removing the distension and so taking the pressure from the organs of the chest.

The question of fluids in the dietary is always a most important matter in the treatment of Heart disease. Sometimes, the indications are very clear; sometimes, they are very

difficult to discover. In general terms, it may be explained that whenever œdema of any of the tissues of the body shows itself—that is to say whenever there is evidence that the watery constituents of the blood are being squeezed out from the circulation into the surrounding tissues—there is a clear indication for decreasing the quantity of fluid in the dietary. By so doing, in these cases, not only is Nature's danger-signal obeyed—which is invariably the wise course to follow in the treatment of any disease—but the result to the patient is generally rapid and very satisfactory. Restricting the amount of liquid in his diet—in a patient, for example, who has dropsy of the feet—to one pint in the twenty-four hours, is generally followed by the speedy disappearance of the swelling. The blood-vessels suck up again, from the tissues, the fluid which they need, and which they are unable to obtain from the intestines.

Then, again, in all cases in which there is much congestion of the tissues, as has already been described, in which, for instance, the veins are overloaded with blood because of some valvular obstruction in the Heart, the volume of blood can be diminished, and the patient is therefore greatly relieved, by restricting the amount of fluids in his dietary. But every case has to be treated, of course, for its own particular conditions, and, except for the general principles which have been explained, and which hold good for every case—modified by the experience of the practitioner, and the daily state of the patient—it is neither necessary nor even possible to lay down any hard and fast rules.

There are many practical methods of alleviating the thirst from which patients suffer, when the quantity of liquid in their diet is greatly restricted. For example, they can be allowed frequently to wash out the mouth, with warm water, or with some special preparation designed for the purpose of moistening the mucous membrane, and thus of preventing the intolerable sensation of thirst. It is well to remember that, if water be used, the best results are obtained if the fluid is *warm*. It should not be hot, and, above all things, it must not be very cold.

This point is so practically important, not only in these cases but for every patient whose condition requires him to be deprived of fluids, that a brief explanation will not be out of place.

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