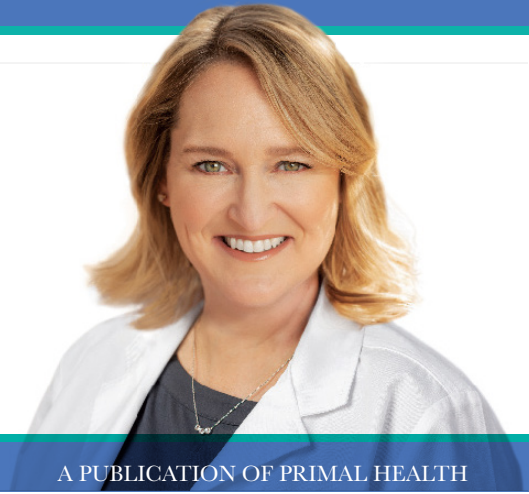


Dr. Marlene's NATURAL HEALTH CONNECTIONS

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Movement Matters More Than You Think — Part Four

Your Heart Is a Muscle Too — And It Trains Differently Strength Protects You — But Capacity Sustains You

Last week, we talked about skeletal muscle — how resistance training preserves tissue, protects joints, and supports long-term independence. We focused on force production and why your muscles need to be challenged in order to stay strong.

This week, we're shifting our attention to a different muscle.

Your heart.

Skeletal muscle helps you stand up, climb stairs, and carry groceries. Your heart determines how well oxygen and nutrients reach every one of those tissues. It determines how efficiently you recover. It determines how well your brain stays supplied. It determines your overall stamina.

The heart is muscle. But it does not respond to training the same way your biceps or quadriceps do. It adapts to sustained demand.

If strength training builds durability, cardiovascular training builds capacity. And capacity influences far more than how long you can walk before getting tired.

This week is about understanding how sustained effort reshapes the heart and circulation — and why that matters for energy, cognition, blood pressure, and long-term resilience.



What Happens to the Heart When You Train It

The heart is a pump. With each beat, it pushes blood through arteries to deliver oxygen and nutrients to tissues. The amount of blood pushed out with each beat is called stroke volume.

When you engage in sustained cardiovascular activity — brisk walking, cycling, swimming, hiking — your heart rate rises and stays elevated. The heart must pump more frequently and more forcefully to meet the body's oxygen demands.

Over time, several measurable changes occur.

The left ventricle becomes stronger and slightly larger. It can fill with more blood and push more blood out with each contraction. That means fewer beats are required to deliver the same amount of oxygen. Resting heart rate often declines because each beat becomes more efficient.

This is not simply “getting used to it.” It is structural remodeling.

Capillary networks expand. These tiny blood vessels deliver oxygen directly to muscle tissue and organs. More capillaries mean improved circulation at the cellular level. Mitochondria — the structures inside cells that produce energy — increase in number and efficiency. That means better oxygen utilization and more sustainable energy production.

As a result, endurance improves. But the impact extends beyond stamina.

Improved cardiac output increases blood flow to the brain. Better circulation supports clearer thinking and improved cognitive resilience. Arteries become more responsive. Nitric oxide production improves, which helps blood vessels dilate appropriately and regulate blood pressure more effectively.

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These changes affect recovery after illness. They influence how quickly tissues repair. They influence how efficiently medications are distributed throughout the body.

When cardiovascular capacity declines, the signs are subtle. Stairs feel steeper. Recovery takes longer. Mental fatigue increases. Breathlessness appears sooner.

Many people attribute these shifts to aging. In reality, they often reflect reduced training stimulus.

Cardiovascular capacity is trainable. And it responds to sustained effort — not just occasional bursts.

If movement is always brief and gentle, the heart has no reason to adapt.

If effort increases for a few seconds but never stays elevated long enough, capacity does not build.

The heart adapts when breathing remains moderately elevated for long enough to require sustained oxygen delivery.

A useful practical marker is conversation. During moderate cardiovascular effort, speaking full sentences becomes slightly difficult. You can talk, but not comfortably. That level of effort is often enough to stimulate meaningful adaptation.

Over time, that same pace feels easier. When it does, small increases in pace, duration, or terrain are necessary to continue improvement — just as we discussed in Week 1.

Strength protects your structure. Cardiovascular training expands your capacity. Both matter. But they train differently.

Putting This Into Practice: Building Cardiovascular Capacity Intentionally

Once you understand that the heart adapts to sustained demand, the next question becomes practical: how do you apply that in real life without overcomplicating it?

Start with one activity that allows you to move continuously and comfortably. For many people, that will simply be walking. It might be outdoors in your neighborhood, on a treadmill, around a mall, or even inside your home if the weather isn't cooperative. The setting matters far less than the ability to keep moving without frequent interruptions.

What we're building this week is steadiness.

Instead of stopping every few minutes, slowing down whenever you feel your breathing change, or turning the walk into a casual stroll, aim to maintain a consistent pace for a defined period of time. For some, that might be twenty to thirty minutes. For others, ten minutes is a realistic starting point. Both are appropriate. The heart does not require perfection. It responds to consistency.

Use your breathing as your guide. You should feel slightly winded, but not strained. You should be able to speak in short phrases, but not comfortably carry on a relaxed conversation. If you can talk easily without effort, the pace may be too gentle to create change. If you feel breathless or anxious, it's too intense. We're looking for moderate effort — enough to feel purposeful, but not overwhelming.

Two to four steady sessions per week are enough to begin improving stroke volume and circulation. That may not sound like much, but consistency is more powerful than intensity. The goal is not to exhaust yourself. The goal is to give the heart a repeated, sustainable reason to adapt.

It can also be helpful to think about how your cardiovascular sessions fit into the rest of your week. If you've had a demanding strength day, your steady walk the next day can feel restorative rather than punishing. If you've been mostly sedentary for a few days, a steady walk can gently re-activate circulation without placing heavy strain on your joints.

As weeks go by, pay attention to what changes. Does your usual route feel easier? Does your breathing settle more quickly after you stop? Do stairs feel less intimidating? These are signs that your heart muscle is becoming stronger and more efficient.

When that steady pace begins to feel comfortable, introduce modest progression. Perhaps you add five minutes. Perhaps you choose a route with one gentle incline. Perhaps you slightly increase your pace for a brief stretch before returning to your usual rhythm. These changes do not need to be dramatic to be effective. Gradual progression is often better tolerated and more sustainable.

If you already incorporate resistance training during the week, continue doing so. Strength training builds structural integrity, while cardiovascular training ensures those muscles receive oxygen efficiently and recover well between efforts.

Over time, improved cardiovascular capacity often shows up in ways that matter beyond exercise. Energy may feel steadier. Recovery may feel smoother. Mental clarity may improve as circulation becomes more robust. This is not about becoming an endurance athlete. It is about preserving capacity — the ability to move, recover, and think clearly — as the years pass.

And that is something worth building deliberately.

Try This Today: Three Ways to Strengthen Your Circulation

1. Commit to One Sustained Session

Choose one day this week and schedule a dedicated 20-minute session of steady movement. This is not a stroll and not an all-out effort. It is a purposeful pace that keeps your breathing consistently elevated from beginning to end. Avoid frequent stops. Let your body settle into a rhythm. Notice how it feels to maintain effort without interruption.

2. Use the Conversation Test

During your next walk, gently increase your pace until speaking full sentences requires effort. You should still be able to talk, but it shouldn't feel easy. Maintain that pace for several minutes before returning to your usual rhythm. This is a simple way to confirm you've reached the level where the heart begins adapting. You don't need a heart rate monitor. Your breath is enough.

3. Add A Hill

Choose a route with one or two gradual inclines. Hills increase cardiac demand naturally without requiring extreme speed. Maybe you can increase the treadmill angle — that will work as well. I read somewhere that a treadmill should always be set at a 3 or higher, so maybe start there. These are simple ways to strengthen stroke volume and oxygen delivery.

Pay attention to how quickly your breathing returns to baseline afterward. Faster recovery is you improving!

What's Next? Part Five of Movement Matters More Than You Think

In Part Five, we're going to take everything we've covered — strength training, sustained cardiovascular work, and short bursts of higher effort — and look at how to organize them so they actually build on each other. This is where the full meaning of “Movement Matters More Than You Think” comes into focus.

About Dr. Marlene

Dr. Marlene Merritt's passion for natural medicine is fueled by her drive to help others, and her own experience of overcoming a debilitating heart condition, diagnosed at the age of 20. A competitive cross-country cyclist at the time, she suddenly began experiencing severe chest pains. Forced to quit the sport, she suffered from extreme fatigue and constant pain for another 15 years, despite doing everything that conventional, Western medical doctors told her to do.

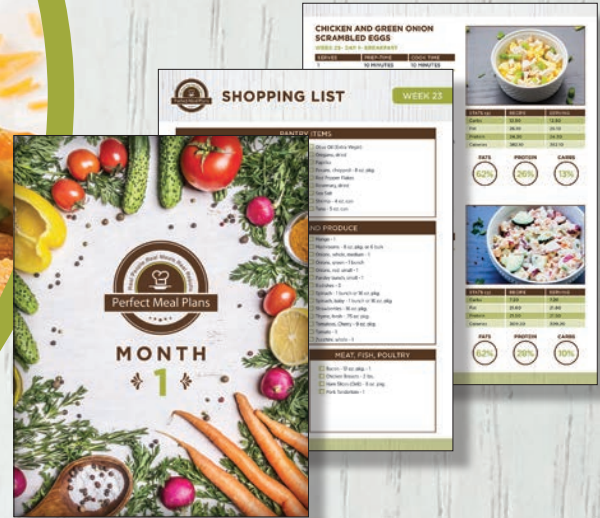
And then, the tide turned. A physician trained in naturopathic healing recommended a whole-food vitamin E supplement. A week after starting the supplement regimen, her energy began to return, and the pain began to disappear.

Dr. Marlene is a Doctor of Oriental Medicine, has a Master's in Nutrition, and is an Applied Clinical Nutritionist. She is Board Certified in Bariatric Counseling, and certified in the Bredesen MEND Protocol,TM a groundbreaking method of reversing Alzheimer's disease. She sees patients at the Merritt Wellness Centers in Austin, Texas, and Santa Fe, New Mexico, trains health practitioners nationwide, and is the author of *Smart Blood Sugar* and *The Blood Pressure Solution*.





Cheesy Chicken and Sweet Potatoes



THE MOST THRILLING WAY TO EAT HEALTHY!

Feel your taste buds come alive...

If you like eating healthy, but hate bland and boring foods, you'll be excited to hear this...

For dinner tonight, you could be eating cheesy chicken and sweet potatoes... and then wake up tomorrow to a savory apple and sausage breakfast scramble... only to pack a scrumptious lunch of Thai turkey meatballs and cauliflower rice.

These meals are **delicious** and **nutritious**, and most important, they're **"perfect"** for healthy blood sugar and healthy blood pressure.

We hired a professional nutrition planner with a degree in culinary arts to create hundreds of complete meal plans. And all of them **adhere to the healthy eating formula** of 65% healthy fats, 25% protein, and 10% carbohydrates.

We call it **Perfect Meal Plans** because it takes the guesswork out of healthy eating.

This inexpensive service provides weekly meal plans that include recipes, shopping lists, and online support. You don't need to be a good cook. You don't need any special tools. Just

follow the weekly meal plan, and you'll soon be losing weight, sleeping better, have more energy and living a healthier life.

Karen L. says:

"Dishes are delicious, they eliminated my cravings, I'm no longer hungry all the time, and better yet, I'm full. I no longer call this a diet. It's simply eating healthy."

And Lewis R. reports:

"Perfect Meal Plans has helped my whole family eat better, and it does away with the insane way people are trying to lose weight and get healthy. The program is great!"

With **Perfect Meal Plans**, it's like having your own nutritionist on call 24/7. So, why eat boring meals, when you can eat like kings and queens—and still get the healthy results you want? And here's the best part! You get tasty, health-improving **Perfect Meal Plans** sent to your email inbox for the low price of just \$9.95. The meals are easy to prepare, they're delicious, and they're perfect for your health. Order today!

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Q&A

Q: Can gut problems really affect my energy levels? — Patty L.

A: Absolutely. The digestive system does much more than simply break down food — it's responsible for absorbing the nutrients that fuel every cell in your body. If digestion is irritated, inflamed, or sluggish, nutrient absorption can suffer, even if your diet looks healthy on paper. When the gut lining is inflamed or the microbiome is out of balance, the body may not efficiently absorb iron, B vitamins, magnesium, or protein — all of which are essential for steady energy production. Over time, even mild deficiencies can contribute to fatigue. Low-grade gut inflammation can also increase inflammatory signaling throughout the body. That systemic inflammation places extra stress on the immune system and nervous system, which can leave you feeling drained, foggy, or less resilient. The body is constantly working in the background to manage that inflammation. Additionally, the microbiome influences blood sugar regulation and mood. If blood sugar swings become more frequent due to digestive imbalance, energy levels tend to fluctuate as well. When digestion improves and inflammation settles, energy often improves too — sometimes more noticeably than expected. Persistent fatigue isn't always just about sleep. In many cases, it begins in the gut.

Q: Why do I feel hungrier at night? — Mike R.

A: Evening hunger often reflects what happened earlier in the day. If your meals were light on protein, spaced too far apart, or centered around refined carbohydrates, blood sugar may dip later in the evening — and your body responds by asking for quick fuel. Those cravings aren't random. They're usually a sign that blood sugar has been fluctuating. Stress and fatigue also play a significant role. As the day goes on and mental energy declines, the nervous system becomes more tired. When that happens, appetite regulation becomes less precise. The body naturally seeks fast, easily accessible energy — which often means carbohydrates or snack foods. There's also a hormonal component. Poor sleep or chronic stress can shift hunger hormones like ghrelin and leptin, increasing appetite later in the day and reducing fullness signals. That's one reason nighttime eating often feels harder to control than daytime meals. Stabilizing blood sugar earlier — by eating balanced meals with adequate protein, fiber, and healthy fats — often reduces evening hunger dramatically. Prioritizing sleep and managing stress further helps reset appetite cues.



Q: Do I need collagen supplements as I age? — Grace W.

A: Collagen naturally declines with age, and it plays an important role in joints, skin, connective tissue, and gut lining integrity. As production slows, people may notice changes in skin elasticity, joint stiffness, or slower recovery. Supplemental collagen peptides may support joint comfort and skin elasticity in some individuals, particularly when combined with adequate protein intake and vitamin C, which is required for collagen synthesis. Without enough vitamin C and total protein, the body can't effectively maintain connective tissue. That said, collagen supplements are not a replacement for balanced nutrition. They provide specific amino acids, but not all the essential amino acids your body needs. Ensuring sufficient dietary protein remains foundational. Collagen can be supportive — especially for joints and connective tissue — but it works best as part of a comprehensive nutrition and strength-building plan.

Do you have a question for Dr. Marlene?

Send your health-related questions to drmarlene@naturalhealthconnections.com. Please include your first name and the initial of your last name. Although she cannot answer each question directly, Dr. Marlene will select a few in each newsletter and will address other questions and concerns in articles in future issues. Answers are intended for educational purposes only and should not be viewed as medical advice. If you need help with your subscription or have questions about Primal Health supplements, email support@primalhealthlp.com or call 877-300-7849.