

A Conversation with Dr. Tenesha Wards
Founder and Medical Director of Infinity Wellness Center

Q. You are the founder and medical director of Infinity Wellness Center, a holistic health practice based in Austin, Texas. Before we talk about your practice, tell us about your medical journey and how it led you to practice medicine in a natural, drug-free way.

A. I've had two different experiences where I had symptoms that were really overlooked or not deeply explored by western medicine; symptoms like chronic fatigue, brain fog, and joint pain that we really didn't have solutions for. So both times, essentially, western medicine failed us in figuring out what the problem was and tried to cover it up with things like antidepressants and pain meds until we dug deeper. When I was 15 with Lyme disease, my mom dug deeper. She went to the library in 1994 and did her own research, and found a more holistic-minded doctor that knew about Lyme disease. And then years later, after I had my daughter, I had a physical crash. We thought it was a Lyme disease flare-up, but it turns out it wasn't. And then, I thought, "*Oh, I'm an older mom, this is what I'm supposed to feel like,*" and I ignored it for quite a long time. We were really busy building our practice, and I was burning the candle at both ends. I ignored it until it got so bad that I just couldn't get out of bed. Ultimately, it ended up being the Epstein-Barr virus and an autoimmune thyroid disorder causing my symptoms, and I eventually healed myself from them.

Q. And how did that lead you to practice drug-free medicine?

A. Drugs would have fixed neither of those cases; they just covered up the problem. So in both cases, I had to find and fix the core root problem, which is what my practice focuses on today.

Q. At Infinity Wellness Center, you and your team work to find the root cause of your patients' issues and then customize a care plan tailored to their unique needs. Tell us about this process that you call The Infinity Way, and how it's unique to your practice.

A. The first step in the Infinity Way is an hour-long intake with a timeline history, and we go through and rate every single symptom on a 1-10 scale. Then we put together the health history with the symptoms, and take a step back to put the pieces of the puzzle together. Next, we decide what functional medicine labs to run that are different and more in-depth from what your western medicine doctor is running. Then, when we get that data back, we decide what program would be the right fit and the starting point for that person. And that's working one-on-one with our team: a functional nutritionist, a health coach, and then they're assigned a doctor.

We're in the process - and we're hoping to have it done soon - of completing the Your Infinity Way program. Your Infinity Way for Gut Health is what we're starting with, and then we'll have Your Infinity Way for Chronic Fatigue. So if somebody hears me on a podcast or an interview and they're not ready to take the step of going through all the diagnostics, they could do this self-guided healing program.

Q. How has the holistic health community changed since you opened Infinity Wellness in 2006?

A. So back then, the term "functional medicine" wasn't really even a word. It was definitely more "alternative," and it was definitely complimentary to traditional medicine. Now, I think people are

looking for this as their first line of defense, as their first stop. Some of them still come to us after they've maybe been to 10 other practitioners, but it's more mainstream and accepted; people understand it, and it's not "witch doctor herbal medicine" anymore. People know what things are like CoQ10 and bone broth are, and I think that people like Dr. Oz, the doctors that maybe aren't going as deep into a case as we are, but just cracking that light a little bit, opening that door just a hair for people to understand that there's another way. More and more people live a more holistic lifestyle, and it's more and more accepted. They're careful about what's in their food; they're using essential oils and herbs and not eating processed foods. So it's not so bizarre and hippy as it was a decade and a half ago.

Q. Did you experience a stigma around it when you started, since it was 2006?

A. Yeah, but you know, I kind of thrived on that. I knew going into this that it was against the grain and that it was different, and I just really didn't care because it changed my life so much. I actually thrived off of being called a witch doctor. I was like, "Yeah, absolutely, we're doing things differently, and we're helping people heal."

Herbs aren't these magical, mystical healing things anymore. You can buy kava kava at the grocery store—it may not be the same quality you'd get from a practitioner, but people know they can buy that, and it will help them go to sleep, and they've learned that from mainstream medicine and Instagram and TikTok videos. So it's progressed by leaps and bounds. We're functional medicine OGs—we were practicing functional medicine before it was even a term that people threw around, and I think it's all marketing. It used to be holistic views, and now it's more functional medicine. Now it's a lot of people's first line of defense. They go to an acupuncturist or an herbalist; it's widespread, and it was not 15 years ago.

Q. One of the conditions you're known for supporting is chronic fatigue. Why do you believe there's an influx of patients dealing with chronic fatigue, and what are some of the remedies you use to help combat and support those with this condition?

A. That's a loaded question because that's probably the crux of treating it: why do people have it? I've narrowed it down to three things that typically cause chronic fatigue: an external attack, like an underlying infection in the body, an internal attack, like an autoimmune disorder where your body is attacking itself, or burnout, like a total adrenal crash. So it's determining which of those three things we're dealing with, and then the treatment will be different. So on a high level, you have to figure out what's causing the chronic fatigue to support those who have it.

On a lower level, if you want some tips and tricks, the three things I say all the time for your body to heal are sleeping, pooping, and hydration. You need to regulate your sleep cycle and circadian rhythms, make sure you're drinking half your body weight in ounces, and ensure your digestive tract is working because if your digestive tract is not working, you're not absorbing your food. It doesn't matter if you're eating clean, good organic food or something from a box—if your digestive tract can't absorb anything, you're eventually going to crash and burn. So stool quality is important.

That's super basic and low level, but I've seen it—when we get a patient sleeping and hydrated, they're 90% better. It's mind-blowing, but yet again, we're living a fast-paced life where I have patients that don't go to bed until 12am or 1am, and then they're up at 5am. They're sleeping, waking, working, kind of thing. So burnout is a big one.

Q. You can't have a healthcare discussion in 2022 without talking about the coronavirus pandemic. What success have you had in supporting those diagnosed with COVID-19 using holistic methods?

A. A lot of it is their immune system. It's not *if*, it's *when* someone is going to be exposed to the coronavirus at the rate that all of these different variants have spread. And when you're exposed, it comes down to whether or not your immune system is stronger than the virus. If it is, you'll either get a light infection or none at all. But if you're sleep-deprived, if you're going through something stressful, if you're on many other medications that make you immune suppressed, if you have other underlying autoimmune disorders, you are more susceptible to substantial infection. So it all comes down to your immune system, which goes down to your gut lining if you take a step back.

We can't treat the virus once you have it; we can only try to make you stronger than it so that once you have it, it goes dormant faster. And that needs to be said because finally, *finally*, they're starting to show some studies around Vitamin D and COVID. It's reached mainstream news that people with high vitamin D levels seem to recover faster or not get a nasty infection. So it's been two years, and we're finally starting to talk about you the role your immune system plays when it comes to COVID.

Q. Related to the pandemic, studies have shown an increase in those dealing with anxiety, depression, and mental illnesses. What are some natural ways to address or support these issues?

A. I think it's important to say that our brain chemistry, most of our brain chemicals, are made in the gut lining. So serotonin, dopamine, GABA, these brain chemicals being out of balance, is what causes anxiety and depression. And it could be situational; they've been isolated and quarantined, or it could be genetic. So testing your brain chemistry is a big one, and then finding out what's causing the imbalance. It could be trauma and stress that naturally wears on the body. Or, it could be adrenal fatigue; I think many people are burned out going through this, and that's causing some depression. Are they really depressed, or are they kind of just tired, with low motivation, and sluggish from being in fight-or-flight for two years? So it's figuring out what's out of balance, and then we know how to work backward to fix it.

I think one thing to note is knowing if you're an introvert or an extrovert. Because I will tell you, many patients I've seen that are introverts were thriving. They were thriving working from home; they loved it. However, if you are an extrovert, those people were not okay through this, and they're still not okay—so finding an online community and finding a way to connect would be important for them.

For example, in our Infinity Way program, we have a morning routine that we take our patients through where they write down three things that they're grateful for, and they focus and meditate on a word they've chosen through their journey. Meditation, gratitude, and things like that have been enough to keep people off the edge. So it's important to know what personality type you are and then figure out what needs you need to have met to feel part of a community and not feel isolated.

Getting out in nature helps, too. It increases your vitamin D levels which help the brain function and helps with depression. Staying in a house without fresh air is worse for our immune system.

Q. As we're in the thick of cold and flu season, what natural remedies or practices have you found to be key in preventing illness?

A. Antioxidants and vitamins A, C, E, D, and zinc are essential. Also, it's important to avoid refined sugar. There's a saying in the functional medicine world that it's not a cold and flu season because it's cold, it's a cold and flu season because it's also a sugar season. We go through Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas—everyone's getting sick because everyone's eating nothing but sugar. My family and I try really hard to have fruit salad for dessert versus a ton of pies over Thanksgiving. Or we make desserts with different types of sweeteners like dates or stevia, just not refined sugar, because that lowers your immune system significantly. And then add that with the stress of the holidays and colder weather - for sure - you're more susceptible to illness.

I'm also a big fan of homeopathic flu sprays. We have a couple of those in our office, and a lot of people opt for that versus a flu shot.

Q. What other conditions are you seeing and treating a lot of right now?

A. We definitely see a lot of GI issues. The diagnosis of conditions like irritable bowel syndrome and Crohn's and gastritis and ulcerative colitis is rising. And I think it's two parts—I think it's stress, you hear about stressed-out people getting ulcers, and that happens because the body will rob Peter to pay Paul. It's going to take all of those good nutrients from your gut lining to make more adrenaline and cortisol in times of stress. So it wears down and thins the gut lining, which makes you more susceptible to gut infections and inflammation in the gut. And a lot of the inflammatory foods we're eating upset the GI tract and make you more susceptible to GI inflammation, too.

We're seeing a rise of Lyme disease as well, and I think that's a bigger epidemic than a lot of the epidemics we've heard about in the last decade, but for some reason, it's not getting the recognition it should get. I'm seeing a lot of Lyme disease and a lot of post COVID syndrome. We're seeing people six months to a year after they've had COVID, and they're still not well.

I think that COVID has triggered some other underlying problems, and I'm proving that to be true in my clinic. COVID can trigger the Epstein-Barr virus, which is a virus that causes chronic fatigue, and I've also seen it bring up Lyme disease. You can live with some of these pathogens in your body, and you can coexist with them because they're lying dormant, and your immune system is keeping them in check. But suppose your immune system tanks as it does with COVID. In that case, it puts people on their back; it's a nasty virus, nobody wants it—it tanks your immune system so much that these other viruses, bacteria, and even parasites and fungus are like, "Party time! She can't fight us anymore; we're taking over."

Once we've found the underlying stuff, we've been able to help those people turn around in 3-4 months. But you have to dig deeper. And a lot of times, these people are left in the dark because they're not still testing positive for COVID, so their western medicine doctor will say, 'Well, you're not still COVID positive, so I don't know what I can do for you.' Some of them have had CAT scans, and they have heart damage because the inflammation was so bad, so those people might need a little bit more intervention than what we do. Still, the majority of them are in this gray area—they're not sick enough with COVID that they want to treat the COVID but have all these symptoms that they can't get rid of.

Q. Many patients come to you because traditional medicine has failed them. Where is traditional medicine missing the mark?

A. Finding the cause versus covering up the symptoms. They're oftentimes not digging deep enough; they're not running extensive labs; they're not looking at the patient's extensive history. They're just not digging deep enough to find and fix it. They're just matching symptoms to medications in a lot of the cases. That doesn't fix the symptoms; it just covers them up, numbs them, or dulls them. It's not fixing what's causing the symptoms.

They're also missing time - the time to listen to the patient, to dig deeper, put the pieces together, and then do the right testing. And sometimes they're overlooking the right solution—which is oftentimes way more basic than a pharmaceutical. A lot of it is way more basic than drugs or surgery. It's food, lifestyle change, and rebuilding the immune system.

Q. If you were to give one piece of advice on how to live a healthier, happier life, what would it be?

A. Vitamin D. It helps mood, it increases energy, supports the immune system, and when you have energy, and you have a good mood, and you're not getting sick, you're flippin' happier. You just are.

I could go into "don't sweat the small stuff" or "relax and meditate," but if I had to say there's one thing, it's Vitamin D. Whether it's out of a bottle or in the sunlight. Who isn't happy at the beach on a sunny day?

Vitamin D is a fat-soluble vitamin, meaning it has to be delivered in an oil because the liver breaks it down. That means you do want a gel cap, and you want olive oil or a more pure oil—a lot of people get a cheap soybean oil, and they don't absorb it as well—so you want to make sure it's pure, good oil. The other place you can get it through is food, in animal livers. It's not an easy one to get through food.

Q. I'm sure that you have a myriad of client testimonials; do you have a favorite that you can share with us?

A. Her name is Adasha, and she has an excellent testimonial. We've taken it and put it in our newsletters—we took a line out of it that says something like "every other doctor has given up on me, and Dr. Ward still hasn't." She was suicidal. When she was scrolling through Facebook, she came across our office and booked an appointment with me one night. I didn't know that she was suicidal at the appointment; I only found that out months later when things turned around that she had planned everything. She was on her bathroom floor when she was scrolling social media and found our practice. I tear up when I think about it; she's still an amazing patient. She had a slew of things—autoimmunity disorders, Lyme disease, etc. She lived in a moldy house, so she had mold toxicity. She talks about all of it—I have a YouTube video of her interview, we both cry, and she wrote a really long, detailed review.

We did lots of things for her. We did a liver cleanse, gut repair, we did antivirals, antimicrobials, we did a lot of genetic work—she had a lot of genetic deficiencies that made her predisposed to a lot of this stuff; it was a journey. But one thing she said about the Little Debbie cakes, I said, "there's going

to be a lot of diet change, are you down for that?" and she said, "I'll eat dirt if I have to." And I think she was dead serious.

People say, "I feel so bad I want to die." I think she pops out because she actually had the affairs in order and had all the details worked out. When I found all that out, it just blew me away.

Q. What makes you excited to get up and go to work in the morning? Why do you do what you do?

A. The impact that we can have when people heal, and they're able to express their full life is everything—there are no words for it. When somebody is bedridden and feels like they don't want to live, and then they heal, and are now helping other people - that is so impactful. I am in awe and humbled when I get to watch that transformation. I just don't have the words.

Many people still don't know this kind of wellness care even exists. So if I were to say, high level, my big mission is to help people understand that they don't have to settle for feeling like they're dying every day or feeling bad every day because their doctor is not trying to figure it out. I like its puzzle, and I am humbled by the results.