THE SPECTRUM OF HEALTH
PODCAST

Podcast Session #55

Vagus Nerve Dysfunction

With Dr. Eva Detko

Dr. Shaffner speaks with Dr. Eva Detko, a natural health specialist, writer, and podcaster, about the sources of vagus nerve toxicity, phases of detoxification, and what low vagal tone means in your life.

Join Dr. Detko's summit here:
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Dr. Christine Schaffner: Welcome to the Spectrum of Health Podcast. I'm Dr. Christine Schaffner and today, I'm speaking with Dr. Eva Detko. Dr. Eva Detko is a passionate practitioner, speaker, author, and educator. She studied natural medicine and the human mind for over 20 years. Dr. Eva successfully recovered from ME and Fibromyalgia and reversed her Hashimoto's thyroiditis. Today, we're goint to be talking about mind, body, and the vagus nerve connection. She has a wonderful summit as well that we'll be sharing. Welcome, Dr. Eva Detko, I'm so excited to interview you today.

00:43 Dr. Eva Detko: Thank you so much for having me. I'm really excited to talk to you particularly about this topic. I'm so super passionate about this topic.

00:51 CS: I know you are, and I'm really thrilled to be the interviewer right now. You interviewed me on your upcoming summit, all about the vagus nerve, and I think this is just such a relevant and important topic. The more that we learn around the vagus nerve, we understand that this is a really key piece in recovering, from my lens, people's health for those struggling with autonomic nervous system dysfunction and recovering from a chronic illness. I know you have such wonderful expertise in this that I'd love to share with our audience today.

01:24 ED: I have to say that I completely agree. It's the missing piece for a lot of people who are struggling with their health issues. I'm not really looking at this specifically. I'm just hoping that we're going to bring this into the spotlight here and we're going to encourage more people to specifically hone in on the vagus function because that can make such a huge difference. You can just jump a few steps ahead in your healing if you address it.

01:56 CS: Absolutely. Before we dive into the science and solutions, how did you become knowledgeable and passionate about the vagus nerve?

02:09 ED: I have to say that my story isn't really that unique. I got into this field, this field of natural medicine and specifically, as I deal a lot with emotional trauma, through my own personal experiences and my own personal journey. I did have to deal with my own emotional challenges and trauma, really, to recover from chronic fatigue and fibromyalgia that I suffered from years ago. It was really addressing those pieces that allowed me to eventually get out of my diseased state and recover. I hadn't really been that successful with just dietary approaches alone, so this was a big piece. It was rebalancing the autonomic nervous system. It was absolutely huge. That really was what got my life back, and I had basically an accumulation of different traumas starting from birth trauma. In fact, I had trauma in the womb because my mother suffered a trauma whilst she was pregnant with me and obviously, as we can imagine, there's a massive connection there--if the mother is massively affected, then the baby will be affected.

03:29 ED: And then, sort of it snowballed for me after I was born and various other things happened. This led to complete dysregulation of my nervous system and consequently, as we go on, the listeners will understand that when we have that complete lack of balance and that complete dysregulation within the autonomic nervous system, this will sooner or later impact our physical health and that is exactly, precisely what happened to me. And like I said, in order to get my life back and get my health back, I needed to bring everything back into balance which, of course, is absolutely possible. We will share strategies that people can use to do that for themselves later on.

04:20 CS: Absolutely. Let's just dive in. I appreciate you sharing your personal journey. It has such a huge impact when you can speak from about your own health recovery. This especially helps my audience, a lot of people who are challenged with a chronic illness. Often, when you're in the thick of it, it's hard to see the light at the end of the tunnel, so I always love to share stories of hope and stories of people really recovering to show what's possible and to empower everyone who's listening. A lot of my audience knows a bit about the vagus nerve, but if they're kind of scanning their body, what would you consider to be symptoms and consequences of vagus nerve dysfunction?

05:04 ED: So just a reminder that the vagus nerve is the first stage of detoxifying healing. In fact, there is much more to the vagus nerve, but the ventral vagus complex is really the one that we want to simulate, we want to increase. When we say increase vagal tone, we're really talking about the specific part of the vagus nerve called the ventral vagus that we want to stimulate, and activate more easily and readily and make sure that there is a strong response. And so you asked about symptoms. Because the vagus nerve is almost like a central line going through our body and it's obviously the longest nerve in the autonomic nervous system, it's a nerve that has so many different jobs. When you stop and think about it, you think, how can that be? That one nerve has so many different functions and roles, it supplies our heart, our lungs, liver, gallbladder, pancreas, obviously, the gut, small intestine, and two-thirds of the large intestine as well as our immune organs such as thymus and the spleen. And so when you think about that, that this nerve is supplying and innervating all of those different organs. Then you think, "So if it's not working properly, then we're going to end up with a wide, wide range

of issues to do with those organs." And that's absolutely what happens. So in terms of symptoms, when people have any chronic inflammation issues, for example, that's going to be one of the key signs that the vagus nerve is not working properly. As we know, chronic inflammation is at the root cause of pretty much every chronic illness that we know about, and yet it is the vagus nerve that is the primary mechanism by which we can switch off inflammation when it's no longer needed. Because of course, an inflammatory response is appropriate in certain situations. But it's a chronic inflammatory state that we don't want, and that is what causes problems further down the line. It is the vagus nerve that, via the adrenergic anti-inflammatory pathway, is actually switching that response off.

07:47 ED: That's number one if we have any chronic inflammatory issues, we can already think, "Well, okay. If I strengthen my vagus function, I can have an effect on my chronic inflammation." And you would be definitely right in thinking that. Other things that will be happening here if the vagus nerve is compromised, you can see things such as issues with heart rate or blood pressure. Also this inability to relax, any states of anxiety, depression, any inability to self-regulate, in fact, because the vagus nerve has a lot to do with self regulation. So people who, for instance, have addiction or binge a lot and can't self-regulate in that respect, definitely can do with correcting the vagus function. Also, when we talked about self-regulation, even things like making decisions, a kind of high reactivity to your situations, that kind of inability to really handle stress in a productive, constructive kind of way, but more being like a deer in the headlights when a stressful event takes place, that also points to this inability to activate that vagus response when it's necessary.

09:16 ED: Another issue would be any problems with glucose homeostasis because the vagus nerve will play a role in that as well, and any issues with digestion. So for example, we already know that it's unlikely that somebody will be able to fully heal the leaky gut, unless they've addressed the vagus function. Also we've got involvement in issues such as SIBO and all sorts of things like inflammatory bowel disease, that's been actually shown in research, that vagus nerve stimulation can also help those conditions. And any sort of microbiome disturbance--that's the gut thing because the vagus nerve is part of the gut-brain axis and hence the connection. And I said, obviously, it innervates a lot of those organs. So that's going to be a knock-on effect there. And because, obviously, we have the vagus nerve supplying the liver and gall bladder. Any sort of liver and gall bladder issues, its not to say that this is the only reason why liver and gall bladder issues would be there, but certainly if vagal tone is weak, then the liver will not work as well as it can do in terms of all the tasks that it has to do.

10:39 ED: And other symptoms to look out for would be things like, for instance, voice modulation. People may actually know people in their environment who, for example, have difficulty modulating their voice and projecting that voice, that their voice is monotone. And that's definitely a sign of vagus nerve issues, as is a problem with swallowing. Any sort of problems when people, for example, sometimes say, "Oh, you know what, I can't swallow these pills. They're just too big. I feel like I'm going to choke." And sometimes they could even have a drink of water or even have a bite of food and very easily choke. If we have those sort of issues, then definitely, that's going to be a sign that there's something not quite right with the vagus nerve. And I mentioned the chronic inflammation, so obviously any autoimmune issues, those sort of issues connect back to that.

11:42 ED: Brain and memory issues also. Chronic pain issues. So when we already have those chronic disease states and we have been dealing with them for long periods of time, and maybe with some success, because obviously we still need to make sure that our diet and lifestyle is dialed in, then obviously, certain protocols that we're going to jump on at the beginning of our journey, because normally people just go to nutrition first, and that is important. But, we mustn't stop there because you'll probably find that it will get you some of the way. But at some point, you will start progressing in your healing and yet you're not going to be quite where you want to be in your healing. So anybody who's listening to this, relating to what I'm saying here, that they maybe have gone a part of the way with different dietary changes and lifestyle changes and yet, they feel that, "Could be better." Then perhaps if you haven't looked at this in more detail before, perhaps it's time that you do that.

12:51 CS: That's such a comprehensive list and overview. I know many of my patients are checking the boxes on that list and seeing themselves in that. Before we move on, you mentioned a really important point. People might not understand this, but there's a dorsal and a ventral vagus nerve, and branches of the vagus nerve. And you just described the dorsal... I'm sorry, ventral. Can you please share what the dorsal vagus nerve is and just anything you know and want to share about that?

13:26 ED: Yes, I think that's actually quite an important thing, to be able place where the vagus nerve is in relation to everything else. We have our central nervous system rooted to the brain and the spinal cord, and then we've got a peripheral nervous system, and within the peripheral nervous

system, we've got the somatic and autonomic. So basically it's a voluntary system, all the muscles and all that skeletal stuff. And then we've got involuntary, which is the autonomic nervous system that I already referred to earlier on. And it's the autonomic nervous system that is broken down into the sympathetic nervous system, which is the fight and flight response, and the parasympathetic. The parasympathetic is the vagus nerve. But here is the thing, within the parasympathetic, within that vagus nerve response, we have two different responses. One of them is the rest, digest, detoxify and heal response--when we're talking about high vagal tone, that's what we want. We want to stimulate that part of the vagus nerve, and activate that. But the dorsal part of the vagus nerve, this is the old vagus. And that is to do with the freeze response.

14:45 ED: So people may have heard of the freeze response, and basically a freeze response is complete shut down mode. Because usually what happens, when a stressor comes along, first thing that's going to happen is that we're going to have this, what we call the ventral vagus, or the social nervous system kicking in. So for example, say somebody approaches us, and we're trying to figure out at first, and the social nervous system, which is the ventral vagus, is actually the part of the nervous system that enables us to read people's facial expressions, and assess whether they are a threat, or if they're not a threat. So that part of the nervous system kicks in fast, and we're trying to work out, "Okay, is this a good situation? Can we befriend this person? Or are they going to be a threat?" And with all the sensory input that we're getting, if the nervous system decides, "Oh, okay, there's something to be afraid of here, there's a threat here," we are going to then jump to the fight or flight. That's what's going to activate next. So we are going to either try to run away or fight the threat. So that's the fight or flight. Well, if either of those works,

then great--that threat's dealt with, and we can just go back to being in rest and digest, and everything is peachy. But every now and again, what's going to happen is that we realize that actually we can't fight and we can't escape. And that is when the dorsal vagus complex will activate, dorsal vagus nerve, and we will go into freeze. And you see that in nature, with animals. When they just play dead basically. So this is old vagus, and we evolved with that obviously--back in the day our ancestors used to fight lions or mammals or whatever, or run way from them. But every now and again, when they knew they couldn't quite fight or fly, they would play dead, and they would freeze. And it's interesting. Because, when you look at chronic illness, particularly, things like chronic fatigue syndrome, when you talk to people with chronic fatigue about fight or flight, a lot of those people will not identify with fight or fight, but when you talk to them about shutdown or freeze, they might identify more with that.

17:28 ED: So it's almost like they've gone past the stimulation of fight or flight, and they're so overstimulated that the body is just completely in the shutdown mode. And that is where a lot of people with chronic fatigue find themselves. That's where I was, when I got to a point where I couldn't get out of bed in the morning. Because for a period of time, that's what was happening. I would get out for maybe an hour or two hours, and then I had to go back to bed. I couldn't function for more than that. So I definitely, at that time, related more to the fact that, my body is not really in that fight or flight mode, it's in complete shutdown mode. I hope that explains a little bit more how the different parts of the vagus come into play.

18:19 CS: Yes, that's an excellent explanation. I know Dr. Stephen Porges does a lot of his research around this piece. When I direct patients to that

work, it can be confusing to understand this, so I think you absolutely explained that well. When restoring and recovering the vagus nerve, we have to assess which part needs more support, or needs balancing, even though probably both of them do, and then identify solutions accordingly. Before we dive into more of this, do you use any other assessment tools? Or have you found anything to be helpful, like heart rate variability, or other measurements to evaluate vagal tone and the functioning of the vagus nerve? Anything just anecdotally that you've found useful?

19:20 ED: Yes, obviously heart rate variability is an excellent tool and heart rate variability coherence, if anybody wants to look at heart math, that is obviously a great tool, a lot of people love that and use that. I would say that I do go a lot on symptoms, and obviously heart rate variability is that support tool, but I don't push it on my clients in the sense that certain apps obviously are free, but other things go along with a mild cost and sometimes I know that we need to do, for example, trauma work with this patient because they're already telling me that's the issue, so I'm not necessarily going to insist that they measure this every time. Some people like to measure, some people don't. I personally am in the camp where I like to measure everything. I come from a research background, I just want to measure everything. And for those who like to measure, heart rate variability is the best measure that we have of vagal tone, really. There are obviously other indicators like for example, bowel transit time and also heart rate, we can use heart rate to a certain extent, because if somebody's got a dysfunctional heart rate, then we know that heart rate variability will be dysfunctional as well. So we could use those tools as well.

20:54 ED: But from my point of view, when I work with people, I suppose when they approach me they're already telling me, in terms of describing what is going on for them, where we need to work and how we need to fix things. So if somebody wants to measure, by all means measure. But I think your symptoms will tell you that things are improving without any shadow of a doubt, because there is going to be psychological and pretty much almost immediate signs that things are picking up and things are improving, and then obviously people will then see a knock-on effect on the gut function, on the brain function and function of all those organs that they might actually have a problem with. So, do you know what I'm saying?

21:50 CS: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

21:50 ED: For some people, they will definitely want to know, "Hey, I started here and that's where I've got to," in which case, using tools like HeartMath or OURAring, that's another one that people like, OURAring. But it's not something that costs a few dollars. For some people, that will be just too expensive and they're not going to want to do it. But if something like that interests you then the OURAring could be something that you could look into as well.

22:22 CS: Yes, more of my patients are using the OURAring as well and, I haven't implemented that in my practice as much, but I think there's a lot more tools for the patients who need that objective feedback and also are looking at progress as well, right? So that can be another way to track progress, of course. How you feel is another wonderful measure to track progress.

22:44 ED: Yes. Do you know what I do? I actually get people to score their symptoms before and after.

22:49 CS: Oh, great.

22:50 ED: So, if we identify that there's certain things going on, let's evaluate that. It's just a simple zero to 10, just do it on the scale, and then a few weeks later, do it again, trying to be as honest and objective as you can be. That doesn't cost anything. It's just something that allows you to keep track of your symptoms and then you know that things are improving. But most people, they just know, they know they feel differently, they know they're feeling better, they know that they're able to make better decisions, they know that they're not as snappy with their partner or something like that. There are so many of those little things and signs, so they will know that things that are changing for the better.

23:38 CS: Wonderful. And then, Eva, why is our vagus nerve so impacted and dysfunctional? We've touched on that, but I just want to get people to understand this. We'll go into the trauma and stress piece in a moment, but what are some other reasons that you see that the vagus nerve is so under attack these days?

24:02 ED: This is definitely a broader issue because we know that vagus nerve can be impacted by toxins. And you talk about this a lot, you talk about vagus nerve toxicity. In fact, I think you told me that Dr. Klinghardt and yourself, you find compromised vagus nerve function in over 95% of your patients. A lot of it will be to do with vagus nerve toxicity. So we know that all sorts of toxicity, whether it's oral toxicity through all the microbes and things that are

going in your mouth, but also, clearly, toxins such as your amalgam fillings, and all sorts of environmental toxicity will come into it as well. We know that we have that issue. So vagus nerve, as much as our emotional states will definitely affect it in a big, big way, we mustn't forget that it's impacted by various other factors as well. Obviously, it's going to be impacted by things like EMF, as well.

25:17 ED: So even regardless of anything else, if we bombard it with electromagnetic fields, man-made electromagnetic fields then, again, that's going to cause disruption within this nervous system and the nerve itself. Also clearly diet affects our nervous system. So there are all of those different factors. We have even a Vagus Nerve Infection Cell Hypothesis. I mustn't forget to really emphasize that clearly there are some nerve robbing viruses and infections, and we have that issue as well. But there is a big, big curve...I would like to just put it into a separate little box and call it the emotional toxicity, so there's all that other toxicity, there's dysfunctional sleep, and there's dysfunctional digestion because we're eating too fast, we're eating too stressed. So obviously the vagus nerve, when it's dysfunctional, will affect digestion negatively, but through our bad habits, we can affect vagus function as well.

26:31 ED: We can affect our vagus function because we, for instance, have dysfunctional breathing. How many people these days have dysfunctional breathing? It could be that you are actually putting yourself in fight or flight all the time, for no other reason. It's not even that you have financial issues or some stress in your daily life, but purely because of how you breathe, because if your breathing is really shallow, you're going to be activated. If you're breathing though your mouth all the time, then you're going to be activating

fight or flight without even having any other stresses, chronic traumas or otherwise. Right? So there are those different other factors that we need to be aware of, and the same with dysfunctional sleep. Dysfunctional sleep alone will obviously massively impact autonomic function. So certainly there are many, many factors, we obviously want to go a little bit deeper into chronic stress and trauma, but there are quite a few different things that we need to pay attention to.

27:38 CS: That's a great overview. Let's take a moment to highlight your summit that's coming up around the vagus nerve that we'll share a link and information around. What were some of the highlights or other perspectives of the vagus nerve that you want to share at this point that you feel people might be interested in?

28:01 ED: The purpose of the summit is to create a really comprehensive resource to look into why the vagus nerve is so important to health and healing and what indeed can affect it, what can go wrong with it, so to speak, and the different things that can be going on. I wanted to create loads and loads of tools, and we included a lot of practical sessions in the summit, so each day we have a practical session so people can immediately follow in with a self-healing session, or meditation, or havening or something like that. We've got different things going on every day and immediately feel that impact on the nervous system, which is very positive. But specifically what was interesting to me was, people were sharing their different experiences with vagus nerve and vagus nerve issues, and a couple of people talked about how one of them actually had a vagus nerve problem as a result of a very stressful experience that she had. It shook her up so much that she actually developed all

sorts of issues across her body, and somebody pointed out to her that actually, it's going to be the vagus nerve that has been impacted by this traumatic experience, and she was put on this protocol of vagus nerve exercises for, I think she said, a few weeks, I can't remember how many. It was a few weeks.

29:51 ED: So when we think about how many years sometimes people deal with their problems for, you think a few weeks of a specific protocol, it's not too much to ask, and it wasn't very complicated, it was just literally a few minutes here and there of various vagus nerve stimulating things that she was doing, and she completely healed that issue. And another person had a vagus nerve infection that caused one side of her face to drop to a point where, she showed the picture in the interview, and we shared that picture because it looked like she was having a stroke, basically, she looks like she was stroking, it was that bad. And it turned out to be an infection of the vagus nerve. What she was describing was that immediately following having contracted this infection she started having issues with her gut, she started having issues with her liver, she started having issues with her heart and lungs, various things. It's just almost like through the whole body, it caused a cascade of different problems. But again, she's a sound healer, and I really recommend it for people who haven't experienced sound healing, it's one of the beautiful modalities that we can use to heal our nerves and repair our nervous system.

31:18 ED: And she used her own sound healing to repair that damage and to bring herself out of that state, and she completely healed it. So to me, that was quite amazing to hear those stories from people, that it doesn't actually have to take that long. Her situation was quite serious, one side of her face just completely drooped, it looked really serious, but yet again, a few weeks

of work with this particular aspect of healing, has actually gotten her out of it and she has got completely back to normal. So to me, I think the most exciting thing that I got out of doing the summit is that, when we really put the work into this, we can see really profound results reasonably quickly, it doesn't have to take years. I think that's quite exciting to know for people.

32:22 CS: I love that. I love sound healing. When I did my summit, I interviewed Eileen McKusick, who has this whole field of biofield tuning, she uses tuning forks. These other modalities that can work with these other aspects of the body beyond biochemistry and that can really accelerate healing, I think that's just such a beautiful story to share. In my personal life, I love going to sound baths. At Sophia Health Institute we have the HUSO equipment at the office and tuning forks and try to integrate that work because I think it has a very powerful effect on our being, our levels. So what a beautiful story to share. And, Eva, you've shared a lot about this already, but I want to make sure you share everything that's on your mind around early trauma and stress, and how that impacts the vagus nerve, in the autonomic nervous system. You even alluded to trauma or stress in the womb and how that can affect the setup of our autonomic nervous system, so if you want to dive a little deeper into any of those topics right now that would be great.

33:40 ED: So, really, when it comes to trauma, we need to be thinking more laterally, we can't just be thinking, "Trauma, PTSD, no, I haven't had any major traumas in my life, so therefore I'm okay. This doesn't apply to me." Because, really, we have an epidemic, talking about pandemics, we have literally a pandemic of attachment trauma. This is so extremely prevalent. So extremely prevalent. And the reason for that, is because when we are growing

up, in the first few years of our lives, we are so, so susceptible, and vulnerable really. It's so, so easy to mess up a little child, even when the parents are loving and caring. They don't necessary have to be abusive, it's just so easy to do. And that goes right to the core of that onion. If we have attachment trauma, it's not just going to affect our superficial perception, it's going to affect the very core of who we are, as well as our beliefs, and our perceptions. So it's basically going across all the emotional layers of our onion, if you like. And so we need to also understand that obviously, there are many mechanisms for the way that trauma actually has an impact on our autonomic nervous system balance later in life.

35:17 ED: And we know that trauma affects us epigenetically. It affects the gut, it affects the microbiome. But what it does, in terms of the nervous system, it actually literally rewires our brain. When we are exposed to stress and trauma early in our life, what that's doing to the nervous system, it resets it, it rewires it, and we become more hypervigilant. And even though the brain normally scans for threats, that's how we've evolved, that's what we do, that's what the brain does, when you are exposed to stress and trauma in your early days, it just becomes so out of control, so we become super hypervigilant and we constantly, constantly put ourselves in that fight or flight, even if the threat is not there. It's just that the brain says, "We need to be hypervigilant, because we survived this traumatic event, or this stressful event, whatever that may have been, and now we must make sure that since we survived it that one time, great, we must make sure this never ever happens again." So we develop this hypervigilance to absolutely everything.

36:37 ED: And that is basically how we end up with these crazy imbalances within our autonomic nervous system. And then further down the line, all

those physical issues. I know we're going to talk about this much more in the summit, because I think it's such an important topic to understand, all the aspects of it, all the nuances of this, so people can really dig deep and help themselves at a deeper level which is really what's necessary to iron out all those issues within the autonomic nervous system.

37:10 CS: I'm so glad you're doing this summit, because you are just peaking my interest and curiosity in so many other ways that I can use to support my patients. And there are so many modalities as the research is coming out. I know how much work it takes to put together a summit, and I know that you poured your heart into this, and it's going to be phenomenal. So, Eva, before we wrap up, is there anything else on your heart or in your mind that you want to share with our audience? And of course we'll share the summit link in the notes, and we're going to definitely send a lot of people your way, because I think this is just such powerful work.

37:54 ED: I want to say that wherever you are in your journey right now, even if it feels like, "Aaah." You may be one of these people saying, "Oh, I've tried everything, and I'm still feeling so bad, and I don't feel that I'm getting anywhere." Please try to address your health from this angle that I'm talking about. Because if you make that commitment to it, a true commitment... And in the summit, I really, really encourage people to join that event, because they will find out so many wonderful tools that can help them. And if you really make that commitment, you will have an impact on your healing that you've not had before, if you haven't done this work. So that I can promise you, right? And so I just want to say, wherever you are right now, and however hopeless things may be feeling, I want you to know that there is a light at the end of the tunnel, and you haven't tried everything yet. I can tell you there will

be modalities that I'm going to be talking about that you have never heard of before. So yes, that's a promise.

39:06 CS: And I'm going to tune in too. I wanna learn about some modalities I haven't had in my tool kit yet. We're just so grateful for your time, and your message of hope, and your own healing story, how you transformed your own experience into helping others. We're really grateful, Eva. So, thank you so much for your time today. And again, everyone we'll share all the information.

39:32 ED: Thank you so much for giving me the opportunity to share my passion with everybody here. Thank you so much.

39:41 CS: Hi, everyone, I hope you enjoyed my conversation today with Dr. Eva Detko. Please check out her wonderful summit by visiting this link: https://vagusnerveconnectionsummit.com/?idev_id=27814