Heart disease kills more Americans than any other disease, with 61.8% of all Americans having some form of cardiovascular disease (CVD). Nearly 2,500 Americans die of cardiovascular disease each day, an average of one death every 35 seconds. Cardiovascular disease is any disorder that affects the normal function of the heart and the blood vessels leading to it. Common forms of CVD are atherosclerosis, stroke, congestive heart failure, coronary artery disease (CAD), and high blood pressure (hypertension). The most common element in heart disease is a narrowing of or blockage in the coronary arteries supplying blood to the heart muscle itself. Cardiovascular disease is any disorder that affects the normal function of the heart and the blood vessels leading to it. Common forms of CVD are atherosclerosis, stroke, congestive heart failure, coronary artery disease (CAD), and high blood pressure (hypertension). The most common element in heart disease is a narrowing of or blockage in the coronary arteries supplying blood to the heart muscle itself.

Heart disease is a condition beginning in the lining of our arteries and blood vessels, the endothelium. Numerous studies confirm the fact that damage to the endothelium is a major factor in the progression of cardiovascular disease and eventually heart attack, stroke, and other coronary events. When cell membranes of the endothelium become inflamed and oxidized, arterial spasms can occur, creating high blood pressure. The arteries supplying blood to the heart also go into spasms, creating a temporary lack of blood to the heart muscle. This same scenario may happen in arteries supplying blood to the brain, causing a stroke. An inflamed endothelium also causes arterial walls to become stickier. Cholesterol itself becomes oxidized by a lack of nutrients and antioxidants, lending to the "sticky" condition. Cholesterol then adheres to the endothelium and plaque begins to form, which can create a more permanent restriction in blood flow to the brain and heart. This buildup can lead to heart attacks and strokes, and can cause high blood pressure to be more difficult to treat.

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Ningxia Wolfberry Cardiovascular Health

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A Nutrient Powerhouse
As mentioned, the wolfberry has long enjoyed an elevated status as a food staple and medicinal agent in China. Growing and harvesting the berry today is done much like it has been for generations. The oblong, red berries are very tender and must be picked carefully or shaken from the vine into trays to avoid spoiling. They can be eaten raw, dried, consumed as juice or wine, brewed into an herbal tea, or prepared as a tincture.

Ningxia wolfberry contains significant percentages of a day's macronutrient needs—carbohydrates, protein, healthy fats, and dietary fiber. In addition to these major nutrients, wolfberry has 11 essential and 22 trace dietary minerals, 18 amino acids, 6 essential vitamins, and high concentrations of other nutrients such as beta-carotene, lutein, calcium, potassium, and iron. The berries are storehouses of amino acids, antioxidants, vitamins, and minerals, in addition to many unique phytochemicals, complex compounds, and polysaccharides.

The high amino acid content of wolfberry is helpful in reducing the risk of heart disease. The amino acid L-arginine has been found to be critical in maintaining a healthy endothelium; a lack thereof has been associated with significant inflammation and oxidation of the endothelium.1 Wolfberry also contains cypoterone, which benefits the heart and helps maintain normal blood pressure. It also contains beta-sitosterol, a plant steroid involved in lipid (fat) metabolism, which helps to maintain healthy cholesterol levels; it has been shown to lower cholesterol levels and the potent antioxidants help in reducing total cholesterol and triglycerides.

The Antioxidant Effect
Ningxia wolfberry is known to be a rich source of antioxidants—specifically zeaxanthin. Research suggests that plant-based pigments may protect the vascular system from inflammation and atherosclerosis. The Los Angeles Atherosclerosis Study showed that people with higher levels of zeaxanthin and lutein in their blood seemed to have a slower progression of blood vessel disease.1

The bright-colored pigments, or anthocyanins, found in the wolfberry are what hold its antioxidant power. As recently as 2005, international scientific groups met to discuss the potential health properties of berry flavonoids (the parent class of anthocyanins). This group of scientists presented a summary of research work showing the broad positive health effects demonstrated for anthocyanins in various organ systems, particularly the heart and blood vessels.3

Their studies showed that anthocyanins:
• Reduce the coagulation of blood platelets, inhibiting formation of blood clots involved in stroke, pulmonary embolism, peripheral vascular disease and heart attack.
• Promote higher levels of "good" cholesterol (HDL).
• Inhibit oxidation of "bad" cholesterol (LDL).
• Neutralize oxygen radicals.
• Down-regulate enzymes leading to inflammatory reactions that cause pain and stimulate other diseases.

One scientist in particular tested patients with cardiovascular disease, and was able to show that indicators specifically in the heart and coronary vascular functions were improved from the wolfberry diet.