

Herbal medicine

Herbal medicine has its origins in ancient cultures including those of the Egyptians, American Indians and Chinese. It involves the medicinal use of plants to treat disease and enhance general health and wellbeing.

Some herbs have potent ingredients and should be treated with the same care and respect as pharmaceutical drugs. In fact, many pharmaceutical drugs are based on the synthesised versions of naturally occurring compounds found in plants. For instance, the heart drug digitalis was derived from the herb foxglove.

In recent years, interest in herbal medicine has skyrocketed, leading to a greater scientific interest in the medicinal use of plants. Many international studies have shown that plants are capable of treating disease and improving health, often without any significant side effects.

A range of disorders

Herbs can be used to treat a wide range of disorders, including:

- Anxiety
- Arthritis
- Depression
- High blood pressure
- Hormonal imbalances, such as premenstrual tension
- Insomnia
- Migraines
- Nausea
- Poor blood circulation
- Skin problems, such as eczema.

Active ingredients

A pharmaceutical drug typically uses a synthesised version of a plant's active ingredient. Practitioners of herbal medicine maintain that an active ingredient can lose its impact or become less safe, if used in isolation from the rest of the plant. For instance, salicylic acid is found in the plant meadowsweet and is used to make aspirin. Aspirin can cause the lining of the stomach to bleed, but meadowsweet naturally contains other compounds that counteract the irritant qualities of salicylic acid. According to herbal medicine, the effect of the whole plant is greater than its parts. Critics argue that the nature of herbal medicine makes it difficult to administer a measured dose of an active ingredient.

Treating illness

Herbal medicine aims to return the body to a state of natural balance, so that it can start healing itself. Different herbs act on different systems of the body. Some of the herbs that have been scientifically studied, and found to be effective and safe, include:

- **Echinacea** - boosts the immune system and aids the body in fighting infection. It is used to treat ailments such as boils, fever and herpes. Echinacea is under investigation for its use in treating cancer and AIDS.
- **Dong quai (dang gui)** - used for gynaecological complaints, such as premenstrual tension, menopause symptoms and period pain. Some studies indicate that dong quai can lower blood pressure.
- **Garlic** - can be used to reduce the risk of heart disease by lowering blood fats and cholesterol (*a type of blood fat*) levels. The antibiotic and antiviral properties of garlic mean that it is also used to fight colds, sinusitis and other respiratory infections.
- **Ginger** - many studies have shown ginger to be useful in treating nausea, including motion sickness and morning sickness.

- **Ginkgo biloba** - commonly used to treat poor blood circulation and tinnitus (ringing in the ears). Some studies have found ginkgo biloba to be effective in treating neurological disorders, such as memory loss and Alzheimer's disease.
- **Ginseng** - generally used for debility and weakness, for example during recovery from illness. It can be used to reduce blood pressure and cholesterol levels, however overuse of ginseng has been associated with raised blood pressure. Some studies show that ginseng can also boost immunity, improve mental functioning and speed the healing processes of the body.
- **Hypericum** - commonly known as St John's Wort. Numerous studies have demonstrated that hypericum is just as effective as some synthetic antidepressants in treating mild to moderate depression. It is also effective for anxiety and insomnia. Research is currently focusing on hypericum's antiviral properties and its effect on AIDS. Recent information suggests that hypericum can interact with a number of prescription drugs, including the oral contraceptive pill.

Do not self diagnose

It is very important that people do not self-diagnose any health conditions. Any medication (herbal or otherwise) should be taken under the supervision of a knowledgeable practitioner.

Special considerations

Never stop taking conventional drugs without the knowledge and approval of your doctor. Always tell your doctor if you are planning to start a course of herbal medicine for your condition. Always tell your herbal therapist what conventional drugs you are taking.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Herbal therapist
- Australasian College of Herbal Medicine
- Victorian Herbalists Association
- National Herbalists Association of Australia website

Things to remember

- Herbal medicine is the therapeutic use of plants to treat disease and enhance general health and wellbeing.
- Herbs can act on the body as powerfully as synthetic drugs and should be treated with the same care and respect.
- Never stop taking your conventional drugs in favour of herbs without the approval of your doctor.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Australasian College of Herbal Medicine

Copyright © 1999/2009 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.

- This Better Health Channel fact sheet has passed through a rigorous approval process. For the latest updates and more information visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au.