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Herbal Medicine

Herbal Remedies

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Teas, tinctures, elixirs, salves, balms, oils, syrups - herbal remedies come in many different forms and are the oldest form of healthcare dating back to at least the third century BC. Herbal remedies and medicines are continuing to grow in popularity with globalization leading to increased knowledge of remedies that were once localized. Between 35,000 and 70,000 species of plants are now used for medicinal purposes around the world and some 5,000 have been submitted for biomedical scrutiny. Herbal medicines are also extremely profitable representing a global market value of around \$43 billion a year. So when did all this start?

The History of herbs

The first Chinese herb book ('herbal') dates back to about 2700 B.C. and lists 365 medicinal plants and their uses, including ma-Huang, which introduced the drug ephedrine to modern medicine. The Egyptians of 1000 B.C. are known to have used garlic, opium, castor oil, coriander, mint, indigo and other herbs for medicine. But many forms of modern herbal medicine originate from Greek and Roman medicinal practices.

During the Middle Ages there was little change in the use of plants for medicine. While the early Christian church discouraged the formal practice of medicine, preferring faith healing, many Greek and Roman writings on medicine were preserved in monasteries, where herb gardens provided the materials for the treatment of common disorders. At the same time, folklore medicine flourished with "wise-women" prescribing herbal remedies (the same women who later were hanged for practicing witchcraft).

Herbs maintained their importance for centuries after the Middle Ages with many herbals being published in the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries in languages other than Latin or Greek. However, the second millennium also experienced the introduction of doctors and pharmaceuticals, which led to chemical medicine

dominating over herbalism.

In recent years there has been a resurgence in the search for plant-based drugs and dietary supplements. This may be partly due to increased consumer demand for plant rather than chemical-based products, but is also due to the growing drug resistance of disease-causing bacteria causing infections such as MRSE (a type of *Staphylococcus aureus* resistant to certain common antibiotics).

A few common herbs and plants used as medicines

There are far too many herbs and plants with medicinal properties to list them all in this article. But here are a few of the more well-known plants and their medicinal properties.

Aloe Vera is commonly used as a laxative and digestion aid, to speed up the healing of skin injuries such as burns, ulcerations and hives and in cosmetic and skin treatments. It has also been used to treat ulcers and diabetes but there are no conclusive studies to prove its effectiveness in treating these conditions.

Arnica is great for reducing inflammation, easing muscle pain, speeding up the healing process, reducing joint pain, and treating burns, eczema and acne. As someone who is very clumsy my bathroom cupboard is never without a tub of arnica cream!

Many of us associate chamomile with relaxation and sleep, but it was used by the Romans, Greek and Egyptians to treat a number of illnesses including fevers, stomach pain and stroke. It also helps to heal wounds, treat psoriasis and eczema, reduce inflammation of the gums and soothe colds. Chamomile ointments can be used to soothe chicken pox, diaper rash, and colic.

Cranberry is thought to be effective in treating urinary tract infections in women. Dandelion is used to treat bloating, gastrointestinal problems, aching joints, skin conditions, abscesses, anemia, boils and cirrhosis of the liver. It is also a gentle diuretic and is beneficial to menopausal women.

Feverfew is said to reduce the pain of menstrual cramps, treat fevers, reduce arthritis inflammation and pain, relieve migraines and is believed to be a cure for asthma. However, it is not recommended for pregnant women as it may be dangerous to the baby.

Garlic is considered by many herbalists to be one of the most useful herbs used for medicinal purposes. It is a well-known antioxidant and is used to help prevent coughs, colds, flu, bronchitis, gastrointestinal problems and high blood pressure. It is also used to treat high cholesterol, respiratory infections and viruses. It may also help prevent certain cancers including colon cancer.

Ginger has been used in Chinese medicine for thousands of years to treat vomiting, abdominal bloating, diarrhea, coughing, and rheumatism. Today it is used to relieve motion sickness, vomiting, dizziness, nausea, arthritis pain, ulcerative colitis, menstrual pain, headaches, fevers from flu and colds, sore throats, heartburn and gas.

Ginseng is a famous Chinese herb that has been used for over 5,000 years and is the most common herb found in herbal remedies.

It is best known for its ability to increase energy levels but is now thought to strengthen the immune system, thereby helping the entire body.

Green tea is said to relieve depression, headaches, gastrointestinal disorders, aches and pains. It is also used to boost the immune system, prolong life, detoxify, provide energy, lower cholesterol, improve cardiovascular health, reduce bacteria causing dental cavities and reduce harmful bacteria found in the stomach. Studies have shown that it may also inhibit the growth of breast cancer cells and may heal scars faster.

Lemon grass can help lower cholesterol.

Oregano may be effective against multi-drug resistant bacteria.

Pawpaw can be used for insecticidal purposes (killing lice and worms etc).

Peppermint aids digestion and relieves cramps, gastritis, motion sickness, nausea and irritable bowel syndrome by relaxing the intestinal wall's muscles and increasing the production of saliva. It can also be used to treat respiratory conditions, colds, and viral, fungal and bacterial infections.

St. John's Wort is used to treat depression.

Valerian root can be used to treat insomnia.

Herbs and pharmaceuticals

Approximately 119 plant-derived compounds are used as drugs around the world today, many of which are quite common. Of those, the World Health Organization estimates that 74% are used by modern medicines in ways that correlate directly with their traditional use as herbal remedies. In fact, the word drug comes from the Swedish word "druug", which means 'dried plant'.

Here are a few examples of common plant-derived pharmaceuticals. Some of them still require the processing of the actual plant material whereas others have been synthesized by laboratories.

(1) Aspirin is a derivative of salicylic acid, which is the active ingredient in willow bark.

(2) Codeine and morphine are both analgesics originally derived from the opium poppy plant.

(3) Ephedrine is derived from an herb and is used in commercial medicines to relieve respiratory and asthma symptoms. The herb from which it is derived has been used for over two thousand years in Traditional Chinese Medicine.

(4) The foxglove plant has been used since 1775. Today this herb, also referred to as the cardiac stimulant digitalis, keeps millions of heart patients living all over the world.

(5) Quinine, from a South American tree related to coffee, was used before 1500 A.D. by Peruvian natives to treat malaria. Today it is still used when other forms of anti-malarial drugs fail but quinine drugs are now manufactured chemically without the use of any tree bark.

(6) Curare, a South American poison with which Amazon Indians tipped their arrows, is commonly used in surgeries to relax skeletal muscle.

(7) The periwinkle has been traditionally used to treat diabetes in South East Asia, and dysmenorrhea, asthma and dyspepsia in other cultures.

(8) Taxol, from the bark of the Pacific yew, is a plant-derived anti-cancer agent. Although laboratories have synthesized the taxol molecule, synthetic yields are

inadequate. So for now the drug has to come directly from plants.

Are herbs safer than pharmaceuticals?

Herbal medicines have been growing in popularity, partly due to the perception that they are safer than pharmaceuticals because they are more natural. But as Dr Saul Green (biochemist and board member of the US National Council Against Health Fraud) has said: "Natural doesn't mean safe. You can find a dozen or more poisons that are totally natural". In fact, herbal medicines can cause serious illnesses including liver or kidney malfunction, blindness, cancer or even death.

But don't let that put you off. In practice, the toxic effects of herbal remedies are rare and herb use is relatively safe. There's certainly no need to give up your daily cup of peppermint tea!

Animal extracts in medicine.

Not only plants, but also animals, bacteria, and fungi have been important in the development of modern medicine. Animals have been used as medicinal resources to treat and relieve a great number of illnesses and diseases for centuries.

The antlers of red deer, elk or reindeer, or 'hartshorn', have long been used in medicines and were mentioned in many editions of the Swedish pharmacopoeias. Hartshorn was thought to be effective against poisons and was used to treat measles and other infectious diseases. It is also thought to help treat stomach ulcers and inflammation and stimulate the immune system.

Historically it has been said that excrement from dogs, is useful for malaria, excrement from mice will help rid you of worms, excrement from oxen will relieve the pain of rheumatism and reduce fevers, excrement from sheep will help treat jaundice, excrement from peacocks is good for dizziness and epilepsy but the effects from pigeon excrement are doubtful!

Tiger bones have traditionally been used in Chinese medicine to treat arthritis and other joint ailments. There is little doubt that the trade in tiger bones for medicinal purposes contributed greatly to the tiger conservation crisis of the 1980s and '90s. As a result, in 1993 China banned the domestic trade of tiger bones, and traditional Chinese medicine removed tiger bone from its official pharmacopoeia with many practitioners favoring alternative remedies. Sadly, in 2007, under pressure from tiger farm owners, China announced a plan to lift its trade ban on parts from farmed tigers.

Rhinoceros horn is used in traditional Chinese medicine to treat fever, convulsions and delirium. Despite protective laws, poaching continues motivated by the Asian market for rhinoceros horn.

Bear bile is used in traditional Chinese medicine to treat a wide variety of illnesses and injuries including liver ailments and headaches. Although there are substitutes, there is still a huge demand for the real thing.

Musk from the musk deer forms the basis for around 300 traditional Chinese medicines prescriptions as well as various remedies in western homeopathic medicine and some perfumes. It is used to enhance circulation and treat skin infections and abdominal pain.

The seahorse is an extremely ancient feature of traditional Chinese medicine and is used as a treatment for kidney ailments, circulatory problems, and impotence. Today around 90 health products containing seahorses are sold in

China and elsewhere. Somewhere in the region of 20 million seahorses are harvested each year.

Heparin, which is used to hinder blood clotting, is extracted from the mucous membranes of the stomachs of pigs and cattle.

The Hindu religion has used five products of the cow for purification since ancient times (milk, urine, dung, curd and ghee).

Modern studies have shown that the South American poison dart frog contains a substance that has an effect approximately 200 times stronger in relieving pain than morphine.

Herbal folklore.

Folklore medicinal remedies, also known as "old wives tales", are traditional medicinal remedies practiced without any scientific understanding of the processes involved, usually handed down through word of mouth. There are various types of folklore medicine including herbs, tree, plant roots, fruits, insects and food items. Here is my pick of the best weird and wonderful folklore remedies. Try them if you dare!

4Rub a wart with a piece of raw steak then bury the steak in the garden under a full moon. As the steak decomposes, so will your wart." Snails are also said to be great wart cures, but you have to rub a black snail on the wart and then stick the snail on a thorn! And that's not all. At the new moon you must point the wart at the moon and blow across it. Your wart will apparently disappear a short while afterwards.

- If you have a cold, chop up an onion and put brown sugar over it. After a few hours drink the juice that emerges.
- To cure whooping cough place a hair from the cross on the back of a donkey in a bag and hang it around the neck of the person to be cured.
- Alternatively, snail syrup (made from 12 live snails and half a pound of brown sugar) will cure a bad chest or whooping cough (my grandmother used to make my poor mom drink snail syrup!)
- To reduce inflammation or a burn put cow dung on the affected area overnight. By the morning the swelling will have gone.
- To cure gangrene rub stinging nettle tea onto the affected area.
- Use catnip with rose petals in love sachets. It is said to enhance beauty and happiness. Grow it near your home to attract good spirits and great luck (and all of the neighborhood cats!)
- Scatter cayenne pepper around your house to break hexes.
- Rinse your hair with a mix of apple cider vinegar and sage tea to help it grow.

Cutting edge developments

So are herbal remedies all old hat or are things still developing? More and more pharmaceutical companies are turning to plants to try and find treatments or cures for common diseases. Just last week a Ukrainian company announced that it had published Phase II of its clinical trial of its herbal supplement for patients with HIV and tuberculosis. The results were positive. It has also recently been discovered that a herb used in traditional medicine by many Middle Eastern countries may help in the fight against pancreatic cancer, one of the most difficult cancers to treat.

And the debate goes on about the safety and efficacy of herbal supplements. The current natural medicine market operates on the basis of 'buyer-beware'.

Even many doctors know little about herbal and natural medicines. In fact, herbal remedies are regulated by the US Food and Drug Administration as dietary supplements (i.e. a type of food) and not as drugs. Generally, manufacturers do not need to register their products with the FDA nor get FDA approval before producing or selling dietary supplements. And it is for the manufacturer to determine that they are safe before they market them - there is no independent body to govern their safety. For years there has been debate about whether the federal government should enact stronger regulation of herbals. On the one hand it is argued that unscrupulous sellers can distribute unsafe products. But on the other hand, regulation might drastically limit the availability of herbals by driving up their cost. This could deprive low-income people and those without health insurance of herbal remedies, which they currently use as their main source of health care.

Despite this heated debate, herbal remedies and supplements continue to grow in popularity with people taking them to prevent conditions from happening as well as healing themselves when they get sick. Consumers would just be well-advised to check with their doctor before taking the natural route.

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