

TECHNICAL INFORMATION

HERBAL MEDICINE

Herbs have been medicine and food for animals, since animal life emerged. Animals have an inherent instinct for herbal medication of their health problems. Humans also had this instinct but modern nutrition and lifestyle has depleted our sensitivities and lessened our ability to perceive this.

Herbs or derivatives from herbs form the basis of much of the modern medical armoury. The pharmaceutical industry does not readily publish these 'humble' origins!

Herbs contain a vast spread of pharmacologically-active ingredients and each herb has its own unique combination and properties. Not all herbs are medicinal in the modern sense of the word, indeed some are nutritive and may be classed as food. They are classified in modern herbal medicine according to their spheres of action. Many herbs contain ingredients which provide the whole plant with several such actions, combined in the one medicine. Recognised actions include alterative, anodyne, anthelmintic, anticatarrhal, antiemetic, anti-inflammatory, antilithic, antibacterial, antifungal, antispasmodic, aperient/laxative, aromatic, astringent, bitter, cardiac, carminative, cathartic/purgative, cholagogue and anticholagogue, demulcent, diaphoretic, diuretic, ecboic, emetic, emollient, expectorant, febrifuge, galactagogue, hepatic, hypnotic, nervine, rubefacient, sedative, sialogogue, soporific, stimulant, styptic, tonic, vesicant and vulnerary.

Alternatively, herbal medicines may be classified according to the category of constituents in their composition. Constituents include acids, alcohols, alkaloids, anthraquinones, bitters, carbohydrates, cardiac glycosides, coumarins, flavones, flavonoid glycosides, phenols, saponins, tannins and volatile oils.

Herbal medicines are traditionally selected according to the perceived needs of the patient and based upon the individual herbs' constituents in relation to the above mentioned actions. Whether single herbs are used or a combination of herbs is selected depends upon the spread of activity of each herb and whether or not it supplies the necessary spectrum of action in the body.

It is of fundamental importance in herbal medicine that plants are identified correctly. They should be harvested from unpolluted areas, where possible and should, if cultured, be grown without the use of modern agro-chemicals. It is also advisable that, where possible, indigenous species should be used because they may prove more suited to the patient's constitution than exotic herbs.

Practical Application Holistic herbal medicine, whether Ayurvedic, Chinese, Western or other indigenous practice, relies upon the whole plant, or defined portions of it. It does not presume to identify a single pharmacologically active ingredient, and use that. Modern herbal medicine is drifting towards pharmacognosy, the science of defining 'active' ingredients, then extracting and purifying them and using them in isolation. This is not holistic medicine and it carries inherent dangers, which do not attach to using whole plants. Ingredients tend to act in synergy and balance each other in nature, whereas man disturbs this balance with his 'interference'. Many products are now being marketed in this way, especially for horses. It is then but a small step to altering molecules, patenting them and making millions of pounds/dollars from a marketed drug, with greater potential for side-effects.

Herbal medicine includes such amazingly effective agents as willow bark (providing salicylate, which is an aspirin-like and effective pain killer), Digitalis or foxglove (a remarkably effective heart drug, having action on all aspects of cardiac function), dandelion (an effective diuretic, providing copious potassium, which modern diuretics tend to drain from the body! - French name *pis en lit*) and periwinkle or Vinca (a predecessor of the potent cancer drug vincristine).

Herbs provide a useful source of minerals and vitamins, arguably far better than artificial sources. The boundary between food and medicine was never so blurred as in herbal lore. Hippocrates is credited with saying "let food be thy medicine and medicine thy food". The distinction is not clear. It is true to say, however, that herbs fall into various categories, some much more food-like than others and some much more medicine-like than others. It is the context, the motivation and the dosage which govern the rôle of the herb.

Examples of Western herbs, classified according to pharmacological activity

Alternatives eg: Burdock (*Arctium*). Antispasmodics eg: Black Cohosh (*Cimicifuga* USA). Aperients eg: Flax seed (*Linum*). Astringents eg: Golden Rod (*Solidago*). Anthelmintics eg: Garlic (*Allium*). Bitters eg: Tansy (*Tanacetum*). Carminatives eg: Sage (*Salvia*). Demulcents eg: Comfrey (*Symphytum*). Diaphoretics eg: Elder (*Sambucus*). Diuretics eg: Dandelion (*Taraxacum*). Expectorants eg: Vervain (*Verbena*). Febrifuges eg: Angelica (*Angelica*). Hepatics eg: Motherwort (*Leonurus*). Nervines eg: Hops (*Humulus*). Rubefaciants eg: Nettle (*Urtica*). Sedatives eg: Skullcap (*Scutellaria*). Stimulants eg: Horseradish (*Cochlearia*). Tonics eg: Elecampane (*Inula*). Vulneraries eg: Marigold (*Calendula*).

Many unlicensed herbal 'products' exist on the market, advertised with great vigour and containing quasi-legal, unsupported, medical claims, whether in the literature, on the label or in the name. No effort has been spent on supplying proof of efficacy, safety and quality (as required for a product licence) and many of the companies have no proper herbal tradition. Caveat emptor - buyer beware!

Terms used in herbal medicine

Alterative: Producing a healthful change without perception.

Anodyne: Relieves Pain

Antihelmintic: a medicine that expels worms.

Aperient: Gently laxative without purging.

Aromatic: A stimulant, spicy.

Astringent: Causes contraction and arrests discharges.

Antibilious: Acts on the bile, relieving biliousness.

Antiemetic: Stops vomiting

Antileptic: Relieves fits.

Antiperiodic: Arrests morbid periodic movements.

Antihilic: Prevents the formation of stones in the urinary organs.

Antirheumatic: Relieves or cures rheumatism.

Antiscorbutic: Cures or prevents scurvy.

Antiseptic: A medicine for stopping putrefaction.

Antispasmodic: Relieves or prevents spasms.

Antisymphilitic: Having affect or curing venereal disease.

Carminative: Expels wind from the bowels.

Cathartic: Evacuating from the bowels.

Cephalic: Remedies used in disease of the head.

Cholagogue: Increases the flow of bile.

Condiment: Improves the flavor of foods.

Demulcent: Soothing, relieves inflammations.

Deobstruent: Removes obstruction.

Depurative: Purifies the blood.

Detergent: Cleansing to boils, ulcers and wounds, etc.

Diaphoretic: Produces perspiration.

Discutient: Dissolves and heals tumors.

Diuretic: Increases the secretion and flow of urine.

Emetic: Produces vomiting.

Emmenagogue: Promotes menstruation.

Emollient: Softens and soothes inflamed parts.

Esculent: Eatable as a food.

Exanthematous: Remedy for skin eruptions & diseases.

Expectorant: Facilitates expectoration.

Febrifuge: Abates and reduces fevers.

Hepatic: A remedy for diseases of the liver.

Herpatic: A remedy for skin diseases of all types.

Laxative: Promotes bowel action.

Lithontryptic: Dissolves calculi in the urinary organs.

Maturating: Ripens or brings boils to a head.

Mucilaginous: Soothing to all inflammations.

Nauseant: Produces vomiting.

Nervine: Acts specifically on the nervous system, stops nervous excitement.

Ophthalmicum: A remedy for eye disease

Parturient: Induces and promotes labor in childbirth.

Pectoral: A remedy for chest affections.

Refrigerant: Cooling

Resolvent: Dissolves boils and tumors.

Rubifacient: Increases circulation and produces red skin.

Sedative: A nerve tonic, promotes sleep.

Sialogogue: Increases secretion of saliva.

Stomachic: Strengthens the stomach. Relieves indigestion.

Styptic: Arrests bleeding.

Sudorific: Produces profuse perspiration.

Tonic: A remedy that is invigorating and strengthening.

Vermifuge: Expels Worms from the system.

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