



herbal medicine



what is it?

Herbal medicine is the use of medicinal plants to treat disease, and to restore and maintain health. It is the oldest form of medicine known and is still relied upon by 80% of the world today. With the combination of thousands of years of documented use and modern research techniques we are able to understand how and why plant medicines are effective. Their use can be detoxifying - for example by stimulating the elimination of toxins causing irritation, such as uric acid crystals locked in joints, which cause the painful condition known as gout. They can also build, encouraging the repair of tissues - for example, comfrey can speed up cell regeneration and enable faster repair of damaged tissues. The use of certain herbs can help us fight disease and regain health, and they can stimulate the immune system to attack pathogens when we have been invaded by cold or flu bugs. Herbs can be used to prevent ill-health and maintain well-being on a daily basis, safely and for free. If you know you have a general weakness in one area of the body, or would simply like to tone and support that part, you can choose a herb to feed that area, for example nettle for simple iron-deficiency anaemia, or raspberry leaf to maintain the health of the reproductive organs and prepare for a speedy delivery at childbirth.

Herbs can also be used to treat health problems once they have occurred, for example to ease the symptoms of chronic conditions such as arthritis, irritable bowel syndrome, ME or insomnia. The *Papyrus Ebers* (1500 BC), from Egypt, is a collection of 800 prescriptions mentioning 700 drugs, most of them herbal in origin. Chinese



lavender, sage & feverfew are easy to grow, beautiful, powerful & safe medicines if you know how & when to use them

herbal medicine is even older. In Britain, the Druids were skilled in the use of medicinal herbs, and through the Middle Ages every monastery had a physic garden. By the 17th century, physicians were few and far between, but herbal medicine was practiced by every rural family, who passed down recipes from generation to generation. The Industrial Revolution concentrated people in urban areas, most knowledge of herbal medicine was lost, and pharmaceutical companies stepped in to fill the gap. Of course, many modern drugs are of plant origin – aspirin and codeine are well-known examples.

what are the benefits?

The environmental benefits of herbal remedies can best be appreciated when compared with the alternative - the pharmaceutical industry. Taking the herbal path avoids all the chemicals, factories, energy use and transportation involved with global pharmaceuticals, especially if you grow or harvest your own. You can choose to buy organic herbal products, you can grow your own organic pharmacy with a bit of land and research, or harvest the herbs from the wild, first ensuring that the herbs you are choosing are not on the endangered species list. (see resources for code of practice). The residue left from making herbal teas can be added to the compost heap, so they return to the soil with no waste. Herbs are easy to grow and most like very little attention. Many herbs like to be left alone and thrive best when in poor soil. Herbs are cheap, and can be free if you know where to find them and how to harvest them.



medical herbalist choosing herbal extracts for a prescription



what can I do?

It is always worth seeking professional help when suffering health problems, whether physical or otherwise. However, with simple, easily-defined illnesses we can do a lot for ourselves, and, up to a couple of hundred years ago it would have been standard practice to do so. The knowledge was wiped out of general circulation to become the property of a select few, which is a pity because this form of medicine is freely available, safe, and it really works. There are over 2000 herbs in use in European traditional herbal medicine, so how do you know whether a herb is really the right one? Self-prescribing can be very difficult. There are so many manufacturers in the commercial market making all sorts of claims for their products and it is difficult to know who to trust and which ones really are appropriate for you & your health issues. Herbs can take time to be effective, and you have to think about how long you continue to use a herb before trying another or consulting a professional practitioner. The premise in traditional herbal medicine is that for each year you have had a condition, it will take one month for it to begin to be healed using herbs. So the longer you leave it, the longer you will take to get well. Obviously most acute conditions like a common cold will improve more quickly than chronic conditions such as arthritis. Each case is different of course, but most conditions should see changes within one month of starting to use herbal remedies, and often



grinding cardamom pods in a pestle and mortar to make essential oils or tinctures – used for digestive disorders or as an aphrodisiac

much more quickly. The changes may be small, like improved sleep patterns or better digestion, or may be more significant, like increased mobility or relief from anxiety or depression. Some body systems, like the endocrine system in women, take longer to show healing changes, because the endocrine system works more slowly on monthly cycles, so real changes may take from 3 to 6 months.

If you are on any medication, if you are pregnant or attempting to get pregnant, if you have chronic disease symptoms, or if you need help defining your illness, then first consult a professional medical herbalist or a GP. A good Herbalist will be able to advise you when a condition is best seen by a doctor or other health professional. If you would like to contact a trained medical herbalist then you can check with the National Institute of Medical Herbalists (NIMH), who keep a register. If you would like to learn about herbs and self-prescribing for yourself and your family, or you would like to know more about harvesting and growing herbs then start simple, perhaps looking at remedies for colds and flu and build from a good foundation. There are some good books out there, or you could come on a course (see below).

resources

- Sorrell Robbins, 2008, *Herbal Remedies: how to make, use & grow them*, LILI
- Thomas Bartram, *Encyclopedia of Herbal Medicine* (these and other books available from LILI)
- National Institute of Medical Herbalists (NIMH), nimh.org.uk, (01392) 426022 – find a registered medical herbalist
- The Herb Society, herbsociety.org.uk, (01295) 812376, information on herbs
- herbal medicine courses – LILI, lowimpact.org/courses, (01296) 714184
- floralocale.org/content.asp?did=23990 code of practice for picking wild plants
- see links page on LILI's website for suppliers of herbs and equipment – lowimpact.org/linksherbalmecine
- Herb Research Foundation, herbs.org, researching the health benefits and safety of herbs
- botanical.com, huge index of herbs, with descriptions, cultivation, properties etc.

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