

Herbal Approaches to Pain and Inflammation

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- I. The simple (**acute**) inflammatory response
 - a. Symptoms > red, swollen, hot
 - b. Inflammatory response / pathway in the body >
 - i. Arachidonic Acid – prostaglandins – COX enzymes – adrenal/pituitary
 - ii. Overview of nutrients / conventional drugs affecting inflammation (EFA's, allergens, Aspirin, COX₂ inhibitors)
 - c. Materia and Therapeutics
 - i. External (first choice)
 1. Ice
 2. Arnica (avoid on broken skin)
 3. Ginger compress
 - ii. Internal
 1. Salicylates (inhibit all COX enzymes)
 2. Rosemary – Ginger – Skullcap (COX₂ specific)
 3. Steroidal analogues – Licorice

- II. The recurring (**chronic**) inflammatory response
 - a. Types, and the systems (pathways) affected
 - i. Recurrent injury (weakened joint, etc.)
 - ii. Osteo-skeletal system (osteoarthritis, etc.)
 - iii. Muscular – connective system (chronic back pain, fibromialgia, lupus, and other systemic inflammation)
 - iv. Nervous system (chronic back pain, depression, 'phantom' pain, systemic inflammation)
 - v. Adrenal system (chronic fatigue, systemic inflammation and the role of cortisol in the body)
 - vi. Digestive system (heartburn, ulcers, IBS, candida)
 - vii. Circulatory system (migraines, for example)
 - viii. Headaches – a multi-sourced inflammation. Reminder that all recurrent/ chronic pain involves a more complex problem and different systems.

- b. Materia and Therapeutics for chronic pain
 - i. Intro – stress (and modern society)
 - ii. Stress reduction techniques; awareness of ‘trigger points’
 - iii. Herbal tea as ritual, for example Rosemary, Skullcap, Blue Vervain, Wood Betony, Licorice, Ginger
 - iv. Nutritional support therapy and the role of cleansing
 - 1. Ensure absorption of nutrients – bitters
 - 2. Light cleanse – sprouts, greens, nettles, veg. Broth
 - 3. Define allergens (elimination diet after a light cleanse)
 - 4. Focus on digestive problems, add more EFA and balance diet
 - v. External treatments (see above)
 - vi. Internal treatments
 - 1. Avoid chronic use of salicylates
 - 2. Systemic anti-inflammatory herbs (Bromelain, Cat’s Claw, Turmeric, Feverfew)
 - 3. COX₂ specific anti-inflammatory herbs (Rosemary, Ginger, Skullcap)
 - 4. Steroid (cortisol) – like herbs (Licorice, Korean & American Ginseng)
 - 5. Nervous system tonic & anti-inflammatory herbs (Oats, Chamomile, Skullcap, Blue Vervain, Wood Betony)
 - 6. Circulation-specific herbs (Feverfew, Ginkgo)

Summary of the Materia Medica – Ginger, Arnica, Meadowsweet, Willow, Rosemary, Skullcap, Vervain, Betony, Licorice, Cat’s Claw, Turmeric

Ginger

Zingiber officinalis

An all-around aid for inflammation management, Ginger is an anodyne (pain-reliever), improves circulation, counters coldness and stiffness, and re-invigorates muscular tissue. Its excellent warming qualities have also been used for the digestive system, for conditions ranging from nausea and stomach upset, to indigestion and chronic ulcers.

Invaluable in the short term, where it provides near-instant relief for sprain and strains, Ginger is also very good at breaking up stubborn aches when used regularly.

Method: Hot tea (internally) or compress (externally) of the root.

Dose: Tea of 1TBS dry Ginger / pint of water, simmered for 20 min.
Tea of 1.5TBS fresh grated Ginger / pint of water, simmered 20 min.

Alternatively, the tincture or capsules can be used, especially for nausea and upset stomach. But overall, the warm tea is most effective.

Arnica

Arnica montana, Arnica chamissonis

This herb is the premier remedy for bruises and contusions. When applied right away, it can virtually eliminate swelling and 'black-and-blue' marks from an injury, and greatly speed recovery. The homeopathic dilution of Arnica is equally effective, and can prevent swelling and bruising if taken before surgery. Arnica is also useful for chronic pain, especially associated with arthritis, and although not curative can give much needed pain relief and mobility to achy joints.

Method: Homeopathic dilution (internally); Tincture or infused oil (externally) of the flowers.

Dose: Tincture or oil of Arnica applied liberally to the affected area, and massaged vigorously until warm.
Homeopathic dilution of Arnica montana, 6X to 30C, every hour until swelling reduces.

Use caution when applying Arnica to broken skin. If there is a lot of bleeding, it is best to try another approach. Never take undiluted Arnica internally, use only a homeopathic dilution for this purpose.

Meadowsweet

Filipendula ulmaria, Spirea ulmaria

The source of the original aspirin, Meadowsweet is rich in *salicylates*, potent anti-inflammatory compounds that work well on many types of pain. Very effective for stiffness and aches, it is however more slow-acting than aspirin would be.

It is applied specifically for inflammation of the lower digestive tract, helping to manage conditions such as Chron's disease / Irritable Bowel Syndrome. It is also astringent, and useful for diarrhea in general. However, because of its similarity to aspirin, it should be avoided for inflammation of the upper GI tract (as in stomach ulcers).

Method: Tincture or Tea of the bark, leaves and flowers

Dose: Tincture of Meadowsweet, 2-4 ml (droppers) 3x /day

Tea of Meadowsweet, 8TBS / quart of water, steeped 30 min.

Avoid during pregnancy.

Willow (White and Black Willow)

Salix alba, Salix nigra

The bark of the Willow tree has many of the same properties as Meadowsweet, and contains many similar compounds. It is perhaps a little more effective for headaches and other acute episodes of pain, and always helpful in more chronic, musculo-skeletal conditions such as osteoarthritis. It can also be used externally with good results. Long-term use of Willow is discouraged for people with upper GI inflammation (see Meadowsweet).

Method: Tincture or Tea (internally), compress (externally) of the bark.

Dose: Tincture of Willow, 2-3 ml (droppers) 3x /day

Tea of Willow, 5TBS / quart of water, simmered 20 min.

Avoid during pregnancy.

Rosemary

Rosemarinus officinalis

This more common culinary herb is remarkably versatile, gentle and soothing to the nervous system while also powerfully effective on chronic pain. It is an opening herb that relieves internal tension by unlocking blockages and stimulating stagnations. Its applications range from arthritis to complex syndromes such as fibromyalgia.

Rosemary is warming, and traditionally an excellent 'Brain Tonic' ~ which highlights its powerful effect on the nervous system. Its stimulating power can also be used externally helping to relax tight, congested tissues.

Method: Tincture or tea (internally), compress or dilute essential oil (externally) of the leaves.

Dose: Tincture of Rosemary, 1-2 ml (droppers) 2-3x /day
Tea of Rosemary, 2TBS / pint of water steeped 15 min.
Essential oil of Rosemary, 5 drops in 1TBS Olive oil, apply externally

Avoid during pregnancy.

Skullcap

Scutellaria lateriflora

Recent research (D. Hoffman et al.) has underlined the primary use for Skullcap: it is a good hypnotic, meaning it relaxes the mind and nervous system without altering one's 'mental state'. Many chronic conditions can benefit from a simple cup of Skullcap tea in the afternoon, to break the cycle of anxiety > tension > inflammation and provide a small island in the sea of today's stressful lives. Skullcap also has a direct effect on the chronic inflammatory pathways, working powerful synergies with herbs such as Ginger and Rosemary for long-term inflammatory support that has no dangers to the digestive tract.

Method: Tincture or tea (internally), infused oil (externally) of the leaves.

Dose: Tincture of Skullcap, 3-5 ml (droppers) 2-3x /day
Tea of Skullcap, 6TBS / quart of water steeped 30 min.
Infused oil, apply externally to sore muscles

Blue Vervain

Verbena hastata, Verbena officinalis

This herb is a subtle but powerful tonic for the agitated nervous system. Controlling ‘inflamed nerves’ can have dramatic results in reducing stress levels: as a result, chronic tension and irritability can often be brought under control. Blue Vervain is best used as an addition to a primary form of pain management, when it is clear that the nervous system is over-agitated or overextended from prolonged stress.

Method: Tincture of the flowering tops

Dose: Tincture of Blue Vervain, 2-3 ml (droppers) 3x /day

Because it is so bitter, it is difficult to take Blue Vervain as a tea if it is by itself. If mixed with other herbs (such as Licorice), or a little honey, it gets easier.

Licorice

Glycyrrhiza glabra

This is perhaps one of the most essential herbs for chronic pain management of many types. It reinvigorates tired muscles, reduces swelling and redness, provides relief for aches and pains throughout the body, and has a wonderfully soothing effect on the entire GI tract, from the throat and stomach (it is our first line of therapy for ulcers and heartburn) to the large intestine. It can help with endurance.

Especially when coupled with some rest and other herbs that support the adrenal glands (American Ginseng, Eleuthero, Nettles), it can virtually eliminate chronic tension and fatigue due to constant stress. Since much of the pain we feel on a daily basis can ultimately be traced to stress, Licorice is a valuable and very powerful ally. It should be used with caution, taking breaks, if high blood pressure is an issue. In these cases, it is also preferable to take the tea rather than the tincture.

Method: Tincture, Tea, or just whole roots to nibble on

Dose: Tincture of Licorice, 3-4 ml (droppers) 2-3x /day

Tea of Licorice, 2 TBS / pint of water simmered 15 min.

Whole Licorice root, a 2” piece daily

Avoid during pregnancy and with excessively high blood pressure.