

## Why Use Herbal Medicine?

There are many reasons for choosing herbal medicine, but it often comes down to a personal choice. Here is a list of why people may choose herbal medicine:

1. It may be the form of medicine used at home or by friends.
2. It may have helped someone they know.
3. A health care practitioner recommended it.
4. No other treatments have helped a particular health concern.
5. The medicines are readily available and can be purchased without a prescription.
6. Plants can be gathered or grown and medicine prepared from these.
7. Herbal medicines can be specifically prepared for the individual.
8. They may be looking for an alternative to drugs.
9. Herbal medicines may be less expensive than drugs.
10. They may have political or personal reasons.

## What are Some Disadvantages of Herbal Medicine?

While there are many reasons to use herbal medicine, there are other considerations as well. The following are specific to herbal medicine:

1. Herbal medicine can be difficult to take due to its flavor.
2. There is a lack of scientific evidence or clinical data supporting many herbal medicines.
3. Herbal medicines can be inconsistent in the marketplace.
4. They can be costly and are not covered by insurance.

5. It is difficult to find solid reliable information on herbal medicine.
6. By taking herbs, you may be putting off taking necessary drugs.
7. Risks and side effects of most herbal medicines are unknown.
8. Herbal medicines may interact with drugs in negative ways.
9. There is risk of gathering the wrong and potentially dangerous plants.
10. The forms and ways of taking herbal medicines can be confusing.

## What are the Risks Associated with Herbal Medicine

A person may have a negative reaction to a specific herbal medicine, as is common with other medications. If there is a negative response, it may be helpful to discontinue the medicine and seek information. One of the potential risks of herbal medicine is not a side effect, but that an illness may get worse from not taking a stronger or a more suitable medicine. It is helpful to have an herbalist and/or health care practitioner to discuss this with.

## Herbal Medicine and Drugs

Many people take drugs that are important for their health. This is a significant consideration when using herbal medicine. The combination of herbs and drugs can have undesirable effects known as herb/drug interactions. Unfortunately, there is no easy way to know if this will be a problem, as there is very little research on the interactions of herbs and pharmaceuticals. The best approach is to work with a knowledgeable herbalist who can help assess any necessary considerations with your specific health needs and medications.

## When to Use Herbal Medicine

Herbs are used for a wide range of health concerns. Many herbal medicines fall somewhere between being a food and a drug and can be used to support general health. They are also used for specific health conditions, chronic disorders, and ailments not treated by drugs. Herbs are sometimes used as a primary medicine and other times as support for other therapies.

For more serious conditions, an informed choice should be based on information from knowledgeable persons and resources. When looking to treat a serious health concern, consult an experienced herbalist, as it can be difficult to find reliable information.

## What to Expect during an Herbal Consultation

Each herbalist's consultation may vary depending on their training. This includes how health conditions are assessed as well as treatment strategies.

Initial consultations are often an hour and generally include a detailed intake. This involves asking questions concerning many aspects of a person's life such as diet, exercise, stress levels, previous diagnoses, relevant lab tests, and health history. Other concerns such as insomnia, digestive problems, or mental health issues may be discussed to get an understanding of a patient's overall health.

At the end of the intake, the herbalist will generally prepare individual herbal remedies and discuss how to take them. They may also suggest lifestyle modifications such as dietary changes, movement and exercise programs, ways to reduce unhealthy patterns, and other health care treatments.

## Taking Herbal Medicines

(Please see *A Patient's Guide to Common Herbal Medicines* handout)

There are many different types of herbal medicine, and for those new to it, not being familiar with the various preparations can be daunting.

Herbal medicine comes in many forms, as there are many methods for extracting the medicinal constituents of each plant. These various preparations also allow different ways for these remedies to be used internally and externally.

An initial difficulty with many medicinal preparations can be their strong flavor. One way to make this easier is to dilute them. If they are too unpleasant, there may be other forms that are easier to take.

There are a number of variables with taking herbal medicine, including the *frequency* (how often) and *quantity* (how much) of each preparation. These differ depending on the strength of the medicine and the health condition being treated. There may be more than one herbal medicine given per consultation. It is important to understand the directions for taking each medicine. If the instructions are confusing, talk to your herbalist about ways to make it work better for you. It can be helpful to set up a schedule, such as taking them around mealtimes. For some medicines (especially for pain and anxiety) the medicines are taken on a regular basis *and* as needed for symptoms.

If a medicine causes undesirable effects, contact your herbalist. If the problem is not too severe, consider stopping the medicine and then retrying it later to see if the medicine is causing the problem.

## Common Herbal Medicines

**Tinctures**--Plants extracted in (drinking) alcohol

**Glycerites**--Plants extracted in vegetable glycerin

**Teas**--Plants extracted in water; hot water is either poured on the tea (infusion) or the tea is cooked in water (decoction)

**Powders**--Plants reduced to a powder and taken internally

**Capsules**--Powdered plants put into a capsule

**Compresses**--A strong tea with a cloth soaked in it and applied externally

**Infused Oils**--Plants extracted in a fixed oil and applied externally

## Preparing Your Own Herbal Medicines

While it can take time, many people find it satisfying to make their own medicines, such as tinctures, salves, and teas. Many preparations are fairly easy to prepare. Look for reliable information or ask an herbalist for tips. There may be local classes, or look for courses online.

If you are gathering plants, it is very important to learn accurate plant identification, and especially to learn to recognize poisonous plants. If you are purchasing plants, search for reliable resources. Your initial costs may be higher from purchasing the ingredients, but you will usually save money from homemade preparations.

**7Song, Director of Holistic Medicine**  
**Clinical Herbalist**  
**Ithaca Free Clinic**  
**lthacahealth.org**  
**7Song.com**

# A Patient's Guide to Understanding Herbal Medicine

## What is Herbal Medicine?

Herbal medicine is the use of plants and other natural substances to treat a wide range of health conditions. Its practitioners are called herbalists. There is an extensive history of people using plants as medicine worldwide. This practice continues today and plays an important role in many people's lives. Herbal medicines may be used by themselves or along with other treatments or therapies. Please see the handout *A Patient's Guide to Common Herbal Medicines* to learn more about specific herbal medicines.

## What is an Herbalist?

An herbalist is a health care practitioner who uses plants, herbal preparations, and other natural products as medicine. Herbalists are generally holistic in their approach to health care. This entails looking at many aspects of a person's health with the goal of finding underlying causes and addressing them.

Herbal medicine is not a licensed practice in the United States, and there is a lot of variation in education and practice among herbalists. Without a legal definition, anyone may call themselves an herbalist. When choosing an herbalist, ask questions to find one that suits your personal needs.