

A Patient's Guide to Common Herbal Medicines

Introduction to Herbal Medicines

There are many different types of herbal medicine, and for those new to using herbs, these unknown preparations can be intimidating. Herbal medicine comes in many forms, as there are many methods for extracting the medicinal properties of plants. These various preparations also allow different ways for the plants to be used internally and externally. It is helpful to know the differences between the various medicines to find a suitable remedy for a particular person and/or condition.

An initial difficulty with herbs can be the strong flavors of many medicinal preparations. 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 as well as the individual taking the medicine. There may be more than one herbal medicine given per consultation, so 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 medicines around mealtimes. Some medicines (especially for pain and anxiety) may be 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 it was the medicine causing the problem.

Herbal Preparations

Glycerites

Glycerites are plants extracted in vegetable glycerin (a thick sweet substance made from plant oils), and they are used similar to tinctures. They are useful for people who do not drink alcohol, as they do not contain any alcohol.

Due to their sweetness, they are often given to children.

Depending on how they are prepared, they may not be as strong as tinctures, and more may have to be taken.

Sometimes glycerin is added to modify tinctures. Glycerites have a long shelf life. Disadvantages of glycerites include that they poorly extract the medicinal qualities of some plants and they may be too thickly sweet for some individuals.

Powders

These are plants ground to a powder. Powders are different from other herbal preparations in that it is the whole plant being ingested. Powdered are easy to take by stirring $\frac{1}{4}$ to 1 teaspoon in water and then drinking. While the flavors vary considerably depending on the plant, some people dislike the texture or the taste of these preparations. They are often expensive to purchase, though there are some that can be purchased inexpensively in bulk. When reduced to a powder, many plants will lose their medicinal properties quickly and have a short shelf life.

Capsules

Capsules are powdered plants put into pill-like capsules. These are a familiar form of medicine for many people, and capsules are one of the easiest herbal medicines to take. One of the disadvantages of capsules is that, like powders, they may lose their potency quickly and have a short shelf life. A number of capsules may need to be taken at a time to get their medicinal value. Capsules are one of the most expensive forms of herbal medicine.

Infused Oils

Infused oils are plants extracted in a fixed oil such as olive oil. They are very different from essential oils. Infused oils are used for a number of external applications, such as injury, pain, rashes, and inflammation. They are somewhat messy but easy to apply.

Salves

Salves are infused oils with wax added to solidify the preparation. Other herbal ingredients may also be added. They are used for bruising, rashes, infections, lip balms, and other places where the medicine is intended to make prolonged contact with the skin. Keep salves away from direct sun and heat as they melt easily. Salves should be applied with a clean finger or applicator. They are commonly sold and are easy to use.

Essential Oils

Essential oils are the concentrated aromatic oils distilled from plants. These are potent preparations and should be used cautiously. They are applied externally either by themselves or put into other herbal preparations such as salves or infused oils. Small amounts are sometimes put into tinctures or glycerites. Warning: essential oils should *not be taken internally* without consulting with a knowledgeable practitioner. They have a wide range of beneficial effects and are easily absorbed into the body. They are commonly available but can be expensive.

Teas

Teas are plants prepared in water and are one of the oldest forms of herbal medicine. They can be inexpensive and easy to prepare. There are a number of ways to make teas, but the most common are to pour hot water on top of the plant (an infusion) or simmer the plant directly in the water (a decoction).

Medicinal teas vary greatly in their flavors, and while some people enjoy their flavors, others may find them too strong or unpleasant. They can be diluted or sweetener can be added to make them more palatable.

It takes equipment and time to prepare teas, making them more difficult for some people. The French press (see picture) is very useful and can increase the medicinal qualities of teas by allowing more of the herbal constituents to be released into the water. It also strains the tea so there are no floating tea pieces. The disadvantages are their cost (about \$20) and their potential to break.

When an herbalist recommends tea, they may give very specific instructions on how to prepare the tea as well as on how much to take during the day. Generally the tea is given in bulk, not in teabags. You may want to avoid tea at night if you wake up to urinate.

Directions for Preparing Tea

These are approximate directions; the quantity of tea and the simmering time will vary depending on the plants used.

Infusion

1. Put tea into a jar or teapot
 - A useful amount is $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 oz tea per quart of water
2. Pour boiling water on top of tea
3. Cover and steep for about 10 minutes
4. Strain and refrigerate leftover tea

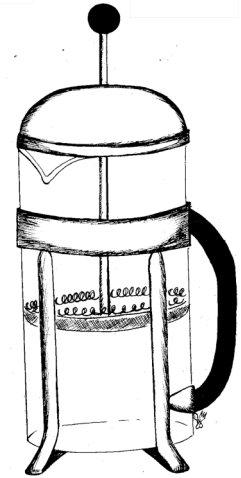
Decoction

1. Bring water to boil in a pot

2. Add tea and lightly simmer for about 20 minutes
 - Approximately $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 oz tea per quart of water
3. Strain and refrigerate leftover tea

French Press Infusion

1. Add tea into the French press
2. Pour in boiling water
3. Push plunger down part way so tea is underneath the hot water
4. Steep about 10 minutes
5. Push the plunger the rest of the way, squishing the tea on the bottom.
6. Refrigerate leftover tea



External Herbal Medicines

A number of herbal preparations are applied externally. These interact directly with local tissue and are used for conditions such as rashes, skeletal muscle pain, soreness, and injuries.

External medicines can bring direct local relief. Reasons to choose one form over another include ease of application and rate of absorption. Liniments are absorbed the quickest followed by oils and then salves. Compresses and poultices take longer to prepare and can be messy, but can bring quick pain relief and are anti-inflammatory.

Other herbal medicines, such as tinctures, may also be used topically.

Compresses

A compress is a cloth soaked in a strong herbal tea and applied externally. They are simple to prepare and are used for inflammation, injuries, and muscle pain. The compress is left in place until cool and then replaced with a warm

compress. Unused tea from a compress can be drunk for its medicinal benefits and can also be stored for later use. One disadvantage of compresses is that they can be difficult to personally apply and assistance may be needed. They also cool quickly and may need to be changed frequently. A hot water bottle can be put on top of the compress to keep it warmer for longer period of time. Compresses can be a wet and messy and it is helpful to have a dry towel underneath.

Poultices

Poultices are similar to compresses, but the plant material is cooked in water and then wrapped in a cloth or applied directly to the skin. These can be messy and hard to apply to oneself. A hot water bottle can be placed on top of the poultice to keep it warmer for a longer time period. Leftover plant material can be saved for later use and some of the tea set aside for drinking.

Soaks

Soaks are strong teas where a body part is put directly into the water. These are often used for infections, injury, and pain, especially for the hands, feet, and ankles. They are easy to prepare (see 'Directions for Preparing Tea' above), but a lot of plant material is needed to make each soak.

Rubbing Alcohol Liniments

Liniments are plants extracted in rubbing (isopropyl) alcohol and are for external use only. Liniments are used for muscle pain, injury, and stiffness and are helpful for bringing medicines deeper into tissue. They are easy to apply and evaporate quickly. Liniments are not a commonly available herbal medicine.

Tinctures

Tinctures are plants extracted in alcohol. They are one of the most commonly used forms of herbal medicine. Tinctures are popular as they are a convenient, concentrated medicine that is easy to carry and take throughout the day. They are one of the most widely available herbal medicines and have a long shelf life without any special storage requirements. One big disadvantage is that they cannot be used by anyone who avoids consuming alcohol. Let your herbalist know if this pertains to you so they can give you a different herbal preparation.

These medicines can be very strong tasting, making them difficult to take. Diluting the medicine in either water or juice can be helpful.

What is a 'Dropperful'?

A number of herbal preparations come in bottles that contain droppers. These can create confusion due to the variability of what is considered a 'dropperful.' Differing amounts of liquid may fill the glass tube when squeezing the rubber top (see picture). This amount also varies depending on the size of the dropper. The dropper size for 1 and 2 oz bottles is about the same, while in 4 oz bottles the dropper is larger.

Ask your herbalist what they mean by a 'dropperful.' At the Ithaca Free Clinic, a dropperful is a full dropper, when the glass tube is completely full. Taking a dropperful often means *taking two half droppers* to get one full dropper. Drops are also used as a measurement, and there are approximately 20 drops in a half-filled 1 or 2 oz dropper.

