

HERBAL TREATMENT OF PAIN

**By Howard Woodwind Morningstar, MD
Family Physician and Herbalist**

Pain is a common experience, that, as all symptoms of dis-ease, provides us with messages about our health and well-being. Ordinarily, our natural healing process works to eliminate the cause of pain and bring us to a new healthful balance. When this process is blocked, the imbalance causing the pain persists, leading to chronic pain syndromes.

The role of the healer is to help the sufferer find the imbalance causing the symptoms of illness and to reveal and remove obstacles to healing energy, thus allowing the body's natural healing potential to flow.

Imbalance, and hence healing, can occur at any of four levels. The most superficial is the physical plane, where body work or surgery may be needed. Next is the physiological or chemical level, where herbs, diet and drugs may be effective. Deeper still is the psychological level, where behavior modification or counseling is often the key that unlocks healing. Finally, prayer or rituals may trigger healing if the imbalance occurs at the spiritual level.

When the healer investigates pain or dis-ease, it is always important to regard symptoms as messages that lead to the ultimate causes of imbalance, guiding us to identify and correct those causes. If we simply attack the symptoms, the underlying imbalance generally surfaces at another, often more serious level.

For example: The chronic joint pain and swelling from arthritis can be masked by anti-inflammatory drugs, but eventually, these drugs may damage the stomach or kidneys, weakening both the body's ability to absorb necessary healing nutrients and eliminate harmful toxins. A downward spiral into increasing pain and disability may result, as in the meantime, the cause of the illness continues unchecked.

An alternative approach is for the healer to act as a guide, helping the sufferer uncover and correct the causes of their pain. One may find that arthritis results from improper diet or chronic inflammation in the digestive tract. Or, it may be related to a food or environmental sensitivity or an immune reaction to a chronic infection. Whatever the cause, if it can be identified and eliminated, the symptoms of illness often disappear or are greatly reduced, eliminating dependence on medications.

Sometimes however, the ultimate imbalance responsible for chronic pain cannot be found. In other cases, the cause is known, but the necessary changes are impractical. Or, the cause may be known, as in an injury, but the pain is so severe that it needs to be treated immediately, while working to eliminate its cause.

In these cases the healer has a variety of tools to use to help relieve suffering. These include relaxation and breathing techniques, chiropractic, massage and other body work, biofeedback, acupuncture, homeopathy and even surgery, which, in the right hands, can be a holistic practice. I prefer to use herbal medicines in my practice as a physician whenever possible. This is partly because I am called to work with the healing power of herbs presented to us by Mother Earth, but also because I find that these effective medicines are often safer than the pharmaceutical alternatives.

The main groups of herbal medicines used to treat pain are analgesic herbs, anti-inflammatory herbs, anti-spasmodic herbs, sedative herbs, nervines and alteratives, also called blood purifiers.

Analgesic herbs reduce the body's experience of pain. Willow bark (*Salix* spp) and Meadowsweet (*Spirea ulmaria*) contain salicin, which is converted by the liver to salicylic acid, an excellent analgesic and anti-inflammatory medicine for acute and chronic injuries and inflammations. Because it is activated only after passing the digestive tract, it has little of the toxicity of chemical aspirin, its synthetic form.

The most potent of all analgesics, herbal or otherwise, are those derived from the Opium poppy (*Papaver* spp). These have been used for millennia to treat severe pain. Unlike most other herbal remedies, these are not suitable for self administration, as only those practitioners certified by the Drug Enforcement Administration are allowed to prescribe opiate analgesics in the United States.

Another important group of pain relieving herbs are the anti-inflammatory herbs. These work by reducing inflammation, a major cause of pain in chronic conditions such as arthritis, as well as in many acute injuries. Anti-inflammatory herbs may work topically, such as Arnica (*Arnica montana*), which is applied externally to intact skin to reduce swelling in acute injuries. Licorice root (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*) and Curcumin, an extract of the of the spice Turmeric (*Curcumin longa*) are used internally to reduce inflammation by stimulating the adrenal glands to produce natural cortisone-like substances.

Feverfew (*Tanacetum parthenium*) is useful for treating rheumatoid arthritis and certain migraines, especially when associated with an allergic component. Devil's Claw (*Hartagophytum procumbens*) is an African herb also effective for arthritic inflammations. Bromelain, a compound extracted from pineapple stems, is used to reduce inflammation from acute as well as chronic injuries.

Muscle spasm is often an important contributor to pain, and when present, anti-spasmodic herbs are often helpful. Wild Yam root (*Dioscorea villosa*) has both anti-spasm and anti-inflammatory properties. It is especially useful for pain from smooth muscle spasm such as that of the gall bladder or uterine cramps. Cramp bark (*Viburnum* spp) and Black Cohosh (*Cimicifuga racemosa*) may relieve muscle cramps and the chronic pain of sciatica. Black Cohosh is also

an alterative herb (see below), often helpful in treating rheumatoid arthritis and other immune disorders. An infusion or tincture of Valerian root (*Valeriana officinailis*) may reduce painful muscle spasms, cramps and colic. Valerian also has gentle sedative properties and can relieve pain associated with anxiety and insomnia.

Sedative herbs alleviate pain by relaxing the central nervous system. Lady's Slipper (*Cypripedium pubescens*) is useful for the pain of neuralgia, especially when associated with anxiety, insomnia or depression. It is also helpful in treating pain caused by physical or emotional trauma. Because the wild Lady's Slipper orchid is an endangered species, it is important to acquire this herb from cultivated sources, as true healing never harms nature.

Nervine herbs relax peripheral nerves and reduce the conduction of pain to the brain. St. John's Wort (*Hypericum perforatum*) is a nervine herb especially helpful for neuropathic pain caused by burns or nerve damage. It is used internally as a tincture and externally as a liniment for tissue injury. Oil of Clove, applied topically, relieves the nerve pain of toothaches.

Alterative herbs help eliminate toxins from the body that often contribute to chronic inflammation and pain. These work by stimulating the liver, kidney, lymph, biliary or skin organs of elimination. Alteratives include Burdock (*Arctium lappum*), Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*), Red Clovers (*Trifolium pratense*) and many others.

Finally, tonic herbs and nutritive foods may be used to encourage the regrowth and healing of damaged nerves and connective tissue. For example, the whole Oat plant (*Avena sativa*) is especially beneficial for encouraging regrowth of damaged nerves.

This overview is presented for educational purposes. For herbal advice regarding specific health conditions consult a qualified herbalist, who will generally compound an herbal formula that is specific to your unique situation. This will often be combined with other supportive healing modalities. Together, these can help you discover and eliminate underlying imbalances that block healing and cause dis-ease. The mindful use of herbal medicines specifically promotes a greater harmony between human culture and Mother Earth. Ultimately, it is this partnership that brings success in all healing endeavors.

This article originally appeared in ***Sentient Times***.

Howard W. Morningstar MD, is a board-certified family physician, and a graduate of the California School of Herbal Studies and Yale University School of Medicine. He and his wife Sue Morningstar CNM, women's health nurse practitioner, share a family medicine practice in Ashland and can be reached at (541) 482-2032.