

# Herbal Healing for Inflammation

& Auto-immune Disease

By Howard Woodwind Morningstar, MD

## **Immunity and Identity**

All living beings must recognize what is “self” and what is “non-self” in order to maintain a unique and separate identity within Gaia’s whole. In complex beings such as humans, this function is carried out by a coordinated group of organs and cells known as the immune system.

These cells move throughout the body, encountering and eliminating that which they perceive as non-self. Together, they form a sixth sense that governs the interface between our internal and Gaia’s external environments. When in balance, they allow us to accept and assimilate what we need to thrive, while rejecting or transforming that which is perceived as harmful.

Immune balance is controlled by hormones secreted by the brain, thymus, adrenals and other glands, which regulate the production and activity of the many types of immune cells. In fact, all aspects of our life experiences, including spiritual, emotional, nutritional and environmental factors influence immune balance.

For example, when we experience severe or chronic stress immune function is depressed. This can lead to reduced resistance to infections and cancers. Or, the energy blocked when one’s personality is overly rigid and expression is restricted can fuel chronic inflammation. On the other hand, loving relationships, satisfying work, regular exercise, rest and stress reduction techniques enhance immune balance.

Immune function is also strongly influenced by nutritional factors. A varied diet of whole, organic foods grown on vital soil strengthens immune balance. Conversely, a diet low in nutrients and high in toxins and chemically altered foods may result in nutritional deficiencies, allergies, and immune imbalance.

Environmental factors, including toxic exposures, water, air and noise pollution can also unbalance immunity. In addition, improper use of antibiotics can upset the body’s inner ecology of beneficial bacteria, leading to chronic digestive inflammation and toxicity. Other recreational or prescribed drugs may weaken the liver, kidneys, digestive tract and other protective mucous membranes, opening the way to immune imbalance.

At rest, our immune cells are constantly vigilant for potential threats to the self. When they identify external invaders such as infectious organisms, they are stimulated to neutralize them. This generally results in healing, while the immune cells return to their resting, alert state and a new, harmonious balance.

Immune cells must also identify and repair or eliminate mutated cells of the self. If these are not

recognized, cancer may be the ultimate result.

At the same time, they must consistently avoid attacking cells of the self that are functioning normally. They must also allow the body to accept and assimilate beneficial “non-self” substances such as nourishing foods, medicines, bacteria that help digestion, semen and the developing embryo to allow fertility or the foreign molecules responsible for such simple pleasures as the smell of flowers.

### **Inflammation & Auto-immune Disease**

Metabolism is a fire in all beings that continuously transforms the chemical energy of food into electrical and kinetic energy. It’s unnoticed when it flows freely, but when it’s blocked, inflammation results. Inflammation is a natural reaction to injury and infection. It’s part of the healing and repair process, and is pathologic only when it persists.

Excess immune activity can cause a variety of inflammatory illnesses. When immune cells inappropriately attack the self, chronic auto-immune diseases can result. These include rheumatoid arthritis, ulcerative colitis, lupus, eczema, psoriasis, type I diabetes, and some thyroid disease. When the immune response is directed against harmless external substances, chronic inflammations such as asthma, food allergies, hay fever and environmental sensitivities occur. Chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia, migraines, heart disease, depression and other behavioral problems can also be caused by chronic inflammation.

Like all symptoms, inflammation is a message that tells us that we are dealing with an imbalance. It’s best not to use drugs or herbs to simply suppress symptoms, because if we don’t “get the message”, the imbalance will resurface later, often in a more profound and difficult stage. Instead, try to use symptoms to reveal the underlying cause of imbalance. Only then can one eliminate disease at its roots, restoring balance and true health.

### **Immune response and Inflammation**

In general, *injury* or *toxicity* causes *acute inflammation*. This normally leads to *repair & healing*. If these are blocked, *continued inflammation* results, which in turn causes *chronic pain* and *tissue damage*.

So, when treating chronic inflammation, it’s best to visualize all aspects of the energy field that governs an individual’s immune response. When these are recognized, it’s easier to help guide the flow of energy away from inflammation and towards healing.

It’s important to scrutinize the sources of injury and toxicity. For example, if alienation and self-destructive behavior and attitudes are prominent, healing will involve spiritual cleansing to clear out emotional toxicity. It’s especially important to heal alienation from self, since your immune system tends to attack what you aren’t, even if you carry it inside.

For others, bowel toxicity associated with poor digestion and imbalances in digestive ecology

may be at the root of inflammation. Here healing would involve physical detoxification using alterative and nutritive tonic herbs, as well as diet changes.

It's vital to determine what is blocking the normal process of healing when treating chronic inflammation. This usually involves uncovering ongoing sources of toxicity and injury, and/or deficiencies in the physical materials of healing. At this level, alterative and lymphatic tonics as well as the healing power of rest are often helpful.

By the time one gets to the level of chronic pain and tissue damage, one is reduced to simply relieving the symptoms of inflammation. Useful medicines here include anti-inflammatory and analgesic herbs. Since the final metabolic pathway that causes tissue damage is often that of oxidative damage by free radicals, antioxidants are often effective for inflammation at this level.

### **Herbs for Inflammation**

The ideal combination of herbal medicines for inflammation will depend on its root causes in the individual. Therapy will change as treatment progresses. In the long run, it's best not to depend on chronic use even of natural herbal medicines. The goal is to eliminate causes of illness before any permanent damage results.

*Alterative herbs* improve inflammation gradually, helping to eliminate toxins by stimulating the liver and/or kidneys. My favorite alteratives include burdock (*Arcticum Lappa*), red clover (*Trifolium praetense*), and dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*). Many people find that when they stop spraying herbicides on their lawns and start eating these medicinal "weeds", they better accept the "non-self" of nature around them, and have less of a tendency to generate excessive immune responses.

Celery is an alterative that is especially valuable when digestion is weak, while watercress is indicated when inflammation is associated with a sluggish constitution. Alteratives are more effective when one drinks plenty of pure water, eats right and remembers to breathe deeply and relax thoroughly.

*Nutritive tonics* can help reduce toxicity by supplying the body's enzyme systems with vital trace minerals, often missing from foods that are grown using modern commercial methods. These include nettles (*Urtica dioeca*), alfalfa (*Medicago sativa*) and carrots. Organically grown carrots are especially rich in antioxidant compounds that reduce inflammation directly.

*Lymphatic tonics* such as echinacea (*Echinacea sp.*), cleavers (*Stellaria media*) and pau d'arco reduce overall toxicity by stimulating lymphatic flow. These are often combined with an elimination diet and cleansing fast.

Echinacea is especially helpful when inflammation is associated with chronic infections. Cleavers stimulates the kidneys, while pau d'arco is best for treating inflammation associated with unbalanced gut ecology.

Important *anti-inflammatory herbs* include Licorice root (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*) and Curcumin, an extract of the spice Turmeric. These reduce inflammation indirectly, by stimulating the adrenal glands to produce natural cortisone. Their action is gradual, taking several weeks to fully develop. Licorice must be avoided if hypertension, heart disease or fluid retention is present. I often combine these herbs with wild yam root (*Dioscorea villosa*) and with ginseng (*Panax ginseng*) as hormonal balancing tonics.

Feverfew (*Tanacetum parthenium*) is useful for treating rheumatoid arthritis and certain migraines, and is especially indicated when inflammation is associated with allergies. Feverfew should not be used in pregnancy because of its effects on the body's prostaglandin production.

Bilberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*) contains anti-oxidant bioflavonoids that inhibit inflammation in the tissue capillaries. Its action improves circulation, increasing energy flow, so it's best used for inflammation associated with blocked energy. Vitamin C containing foods and milk thistle (*Silybum marianum*) are additional important antioxidants.

Bromelain, a compound extracted from pineapples, can reduce both acute and chronic inflammation. Quercetin, a substance found in onions and eucalyptus leaf helps stabilize mast cells and reduces histamine release, making it especially helpful for relieving allergic inflammations. Nettle leaf is another herbal anti-histamine, used for chronic inflammations as well as acute allergic attacks.

One can also tone down immune excess with Omega-3 fatty acids, found in cold water fish, and Omega-6 fatty acids, found in evening primrose (*Oenothera biennis*) black currant and borage (*Borago officinalis*) oils. Flax seeds are rich in essential fatty acids that have similar anti-inflammatory effects.

Devil's Claw (*Harpagophytum procumbens*) is an African herb, often helpful in treating arthritic inflammations. Boswellia (*Boswellia serrata*) is an Ayurvedic herb used for rheumatoid arthritis. Ginger (*Zingiber officinale*) and Chamomile (*Matricaria chamomilla*), both of which reduce inflammation, muscle spasm, pain and swelling are especially valuable when digestion is deficient.

It's often helpful to treat localized joint inflammations with herbal poultices. These draw out toxins through the skin and increase circulation, overcome blockages to healing. Commonly used poultice herbs include Flax, Mustard, Onion, Plantain, Ginger, Mallow and Comfrey.

*Anti-spasmodic herbs* are used when inflammation triggers muscle spasms. Wild yam root (*Dioscorea villosa*) has both anti-spasmodic and anti-inflammatory properties, and is especially useful for smooth muscle spasm. Black Cohosh (*Cimicifuga racemosa*) is used for muscle spasm and the chronic pain of sciatica. It's also an alterative herb beneficial for rheumatoid arthritis and other excess immune disorders.

*Analgesic herbs* reduce the body's experience of pain. Willow bark (*Salix* sp.) and meadowsweet (*Spirea ulmaria*) contain salicin, which is converted by the liver to salicylic acid, an effective 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 are those derived from the opium poppy (*Papaver* sp.), which has been used for millennia to treat severe pain. Because of its potential for abuse, this herbal medicine has been restricted to use only by prescription from registered health professionals.

### **Conclusion**

Our civilization is facing an unprecedented epidemic of chronic inflammations and auto immune diseases. It appears that the message here is that we have fallen out of balance with Gaia's energy flow. We need to regain balance within ourselves, with the buildings and cities we inhabit, with the plants and animals around us, and with our mother earth. I believe that here lies the solution to this modern epidemic. May we make the needed changes, first in ourselves, then all around us: May it be so!

This overview is presented for educational purposes only. For advice regarding specific health conditions consult a qualified health care professional.

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

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