

Herbal and Holistic Treatment of Infections

By Howard Woodwind Morningstar, MD

We humans have traditionally thought of ourselves as being at the top of our planet's "food chain". We often see ourselves as an invincible species, capable of out hunting, out-competing and eliminating any rival, so that we can make use of the earth's resources as we desire.

This mistaken concept was challenged in the mid-1800s, when Pasteur proposed the germ theory of disease. According to this theory, our species is continuously preyed upon by a multitude of microscopic organisms, including bacteria, viruses, yeasts, fungi and protozoans. When these tiny predators successfully attack us, we experience one of many infectious diseases. This places our species not at the top, but rather in the midst of Gaia's vast and complex food web.

Because of the acceptance of this theory, and the subsequent discovery of anti-biotic drugs in the mid-1900s, the importance of individual resistance to infections has been largely neglected until recently.

Ordinarily, when an individual is exposed to an infectious organism, their immune system is activated and resists the attack. This explains how a healer may come into contact with hundreds of sick individuals without becoming ill. We become ill only when our resistance to infection is impaired or if it is overcome by an especially potent attack. Fortunately, the strong immune response of healthy individuals will lead to complete recovery from most infections.

When this natural healing process occurs, we often emerge stronger than before, with long lasting immunity to the infectious organism.

In nature, healthy individuals can usually defend themselves against attack by predators. The individuals who survive bestow their survival advantages upon their offspring. On the other hand, weaker individuals are often overcome, and so provide sustenance for predators. In this manner, predator and prey species co-evolve in a state of mutually beneficial balance.

When this natural balance is upset, disastrous consequences may result. For example, crowded and filthy living conditions in the cities of medieval Europe provided an opportunity for the black plague epidemics to devastate entire civilizations. Similarly, introduction of measles to the Americas by European colonists wiped out entire tribes, as native peoples had no resistance to this infection.

In our time, the natural balance between humans and our microscopic predators is being radically disrupted by the indiscriminate use of antibiotics in the treatment of infections. The ecosystem is also being flooded by antibiotic drugs used routinely by the meat and dairy industries. This process breeds "super-bugs" that are increasingly virulent and resistant to

multiple antibiotics. The pharmaceutical industry has responded by developing ever more powerful drugs, and an accelerating “arms race” between human science and microscopic predators has ensued.

On a personal level, we can successfully prevent and treat most infections by maintaining a healthy immune system. This requires proper nutrition with a varied diet of whole, fresh foods, attention to good hygiene, adequate rest, involvement in satisfying work, creative activities and loving relationships, as well as effective stress management.

Signs of weakened immunity include frequent (more than twice a year) or prolonged infections and slow healing of wounds. Chronic fatigue, ongoing allergic reactions and other inflammations, poor digestion and susceptibility to organisms that are normally present, such as the yeast *Candida albicans* may also indicate impaired immunity.

Even healthy individuals with strong, well-balanced immune systems will occasionally get sick. When this occurs, it's important to realize that all illnesses are messages, that, if properly heeded provide information that can actually improve our future health.

When sick with an infectious disease of any kind, it's important first of all to focus one's resources on fighting the infection. This usually means resting from one's normal activities. The typical advertisement that urges us to take a drug that suppresses the symptoms of illness so we can get back to work runs contrary to this natural response to illness. Resting not only helps direct the body's energy towards healing, but also provides us with the space to become aware of and to integrate the particular message presented to us by the illness.

It's also helpful to find nourishment and support for the body and soul in general, and for the infected organ or body part in particular. This should include healing care and attention from others and a comforting external environment. A positive attitude and laughter are especially beneficial.

When one is ill, toxins, which can inhibit the healing process, tend to build up in the body. Because of this, it's best to switch to a light, easily digestible diet and to avoid animal products and heavily processed or greasy foods.

Increasing one's intake of clear liquids will stimulate urine output, helping remove toxins through the kidneys. Teas made with diaphoretic herbs such as Angelica (*Angelica archangelica*), Elderberries and flowers (*Sambucus nigra*), Ginger (*Zingiber officinale*), Peppermint (*Mentha piperita*) and Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*), will help eliminate toxins through the skin by increasing perspiration. Blood purifier herbs, such as Burdock (*Arctium lappa*), Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) and Red Clover (*Trifolium pratense*) can speed recovery by gently stimulating liver function.

Sometimes it's helpful to take specific herbs and nutrients that stimulate the immune response.

These include antioxidants such as vitamins A, C and E, Zinc and foods rich in trace mineral used by the immune system, such as Kelp and Nettles (*Urtica dioica*). Immune stimulating herbs that can be helpful include Echinacea (*Echinacea spp*), Garlic, Ginkgo (*Ginkgo biloba*) and St. John's Wort (*Hypericum perforatum*).

When treating infections, it's important to realize that fever is one of the body's natural defense mechanisms against infection. Therefore, it's best not to treat a fever, unless it's unusually high or troublesome. Useful natural remedies for fever include lukewarm baths and herbs such as Feverfew (*Tanacetum parthenum*) and Willow Bark (*Salix spp*).

For more severe or persistent infections, it may be necessary to directly inhibit the growth of the infectious organism. There are numerous herbal medicines that have anti-microbial properties, including Echinacea, Eucalyptus (*Eucalyptus globulus*), Garlic, Goldenseal (*Hydrastis canadensis*) and Thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*). Over harvesting of Goldenseal is causing this wonderful medicine to become increasingly rare in the wild, so it's best to use organically cultivated "wild grown" Goldenseal rather the wildcrafted herb. Our personal healing should never come at the expense of Mother Earth.

The current era of antibiotic use began with the discovery of Penicillin, a natural product of the *Penicillium* mold. Antibiotics (literally "against-life") are powerful medicines, that, while often overused, have since saved millions of lives. They are indicated when an infection is unusually intense, prolonged or occurs in weaker individuals. When they are needed, the wise healer will combine them with natural medicines that continue to support the body's innate healing potential.

This overview is presented for educational purposes only. For herbal advise regarding specific health conditions consult a qualified herbalist or other knowledgeable health care professional. 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.

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