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Using Herbs Effectively

By Neva Howell

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My introduction into natural medicines and healing was the same as many. It started with an exploration in the use of vitamins, minerals and herbs. I soon discovered that I really liked the effect of these natural approaches to healing far better than their prescription counterparts and eventually decided to work with them exclusively, to stay healthy. From this decision, and in conjunction with my work as a minister and spiritual healer, it soon came to be a way that I helped others who wanted to heal naturally, as well.

Some important things to remember about natural medicines as opposed to prescription drugs is that more time is typically required to see results. Healing, the natural way, goes to the core of the problem where much of western medicine deals with the cessation of symptoms. To the Naturopath, symptoms are seen as clues to the problem of origin, and not as something to be treated but to be monitored as treatment progresses. Of course, in some cases, temporary relief of symptoms is called for, if one has to work or cannot afford to take time off to let the body do it's job of naturally dealing with imbalances. The problem in our society is that we've begun to depend on the "quick fix" of the antacid, the headache remedy, the sleeping pill, or the nerve pill, instead of dealing with the core imbalances.

One of the more dangerous dependencies we've developed is a dependence on antibiotics. What has happened over time is that viruses and bacteria have developed ways to survive stronger and stronger antibiotics and some holistic healthcare providers (myself included) believe that it may not be long until even the strongest available antibiotic will not be effective. We must learn to support our bodie's natural defense system, give it the nutrition it needs to stay healthy, and deal with our emotional, mental and spiritual lives in a more healthy way.

In this article, I will focus on ways to use herbs effectively for health and wellness, but the same guidelines could be used when choosing to work with other natural approaches, such as vitamins, minerals, etc.

Please remember that this information is given for educational purposes only. I do not diagnose or prescribe but only share holistic options for wellness that many are seeking in today's world. The tips I

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share below have come from my own personal experience in the use of herbal remedies for my own healing and are not to be construed as replacing any current medication or regimen suggested by your doctor. It is my hope that you've chosen a physician who is open to natural supplementation.

Tips for working with herbs:

1. Self-monitoring – Starting with low dosage

Whenever I decide to take a new substance into my body system, for the purpose of healing or correcting some condition, I understand that I have decided to self-medicate. This is my right, and it is also my responsibility. I have come to realize that any substance at all can cause an allergic reaction (many people are allergic to peanut butter, wheat, milk, and other common foods, for example), and

that the most important time for paying attention is the first three days I add something new.

Some things I have learned to notice are my physical energy level, any changes in breathing, temperature, skin color, itching or rash-like symptoms, dizziness, and my mental/emotional state.

Determining whether or not to continue taking a formula has sometimes been a little tricky for me because when a person begins taking a detox formula, the symptoms of necessary internal cleansing can be the same as allergic reactions. The skin is our largest eliminatory organ and can respond to a big release of toxins by temporarily developing rash-like symptoms. Also, detoxing often does temporarily tax the entire system (due to toxins being released and having to be flushed out through the skin, liver, spleen, kidneys and colon and can create feelings of fatigue, depression, etc.

For me, the way to know for sure that whatever reactions I have are not allergic in nature is to start with a very low dosage and work my way up to the recommended dosage. By starting with a very low dosage — too low for rapid detox to be a factor — at least, for 2–3 days, I can eliminate allergic reaction and side effects as reasons for any symptoms. For example, if I were to take a tincture, and the dosage was 15 drops three times a day, I might start with five drops, once a day. Then, after a day or two, I increase to two times daily, then three. I only increase dosage after I have reached three doses per day. I do this because the efficiency of the medicine is in great part dependent on the medicine being in the system continually. Until I get up to three doses a day, that doesn't happen. After I'm sure the continual dose is not causing a problem, then I feel it is safe to increase. This method is one I choose to employ mainly when taking those formulas containing many herbs or those designed for heavy detox. Single herbs have rarely posed a problem for me.

2. Adding one new thing at a time: I learned this one the hard way. I'm a little short on patience sometimes, and wanted to do a liver detox at the same time I was trying to lose a little weight and work with my low blood pressure. I added four different formulas at once, and started at the trial dosage, three times a day.

Within a few days, I had an irritation develop. I didn't know which formula was causing the reaction, so I cut them all out. The problem persisted. So I started taking my own anti-yeast formula. Things got instantly better but, as soon as I stopped taking the formula, the problem was back and full-blown

again. Finally, through the process of elimination, I tracked the culprit down and it turned out to be a new enzyme formula I had not even considered that, because I've been taking enzymes for years (I don't eat enough raw foods, so my body requires some digestion assistance) but I had not been taking that particular formula until just before the problem started (about the time I started with the herb tinctures). As soon as I switched back to the enzymes I had been taking before, I got much better and soon, all symptoms were gone. If I had only added one thing at a time, it would have been very easy to determine what had caused the problem.

3. Giving it time:

Herbs definitely take longer to create relief of some symptoms and conditions than some of their pharmaceutical counterparts. Look at all the antacids, for example. All offer near-instant relief and some even promise to stop heartburn BEFORE it starts; yet, none of them promise to eliminate the condition that is causing the heartburn to keep coming back. The big difference between those types of products and herbal medicines is the focus. The focus of herbal medicine is to create a healthy environment in the body system, rebuild, cleanse, and permanently heal.

The primary focus of "quick-fix" medicines is to relieve symptoms temporarily, such as pain, indigestion or depression. Relieving distressing symptoms is not necessarily a bad thing. If I've got terrible heartburn, for example, quick relief can be very valuable and I won't hesitate to chew a few antacid tablets if I don't have time to make some nice ginger tea for the same effect. However, if I fail to acknowledge that some imbalance of my total physical system, as well as some corresponding imbalance in my non-physical system (either mentally, emotionally, and/or spiritually) is causing me to manifest the symptoms and continue to treat those symptoms without dealing with the causative factors, then simple heartburn will eventually turn into something far more serious.

To completely balance an chronic or very serious condition in the holistic, herbal way, may take six months to a year. Usually, I see improvement within a week or so but each person's system is different so my advice would be to hang in there for at least a month or two (in the absence of allergic reactions, of course) before deciding that a certain regimen is not working for you. Also, just because one herb doesn't work, please don't decide that none of them will. In fact, most drugs have far more potential for allergic reaction than full plant herbal preparations, by far. Each person's chemistry and metabolic make-up is unique. I'd keep trying until you find the right combination and dosage. Therein is an important key to cure.

4. Shaking things up:

I believe that shaking the bottle (when using a tincture, or other stored liquid preparation) before each use actually rejuvenates, reactivates and stimulates the potency of the medicine. This is a component of homeopathic medicine called succussion, which, I feel, applies equally to herbal tinctures. Of course, proper succussion in homeopathy involves striking the bottle against a soft object (like a pillow) for 100 times.

This I do when I first buy a new tincture but only then. After that, I just tap it 10 times before use. Note: This is not according to any homeopathic guideline and you might hear different suggestions from a

homeopathic physician. This is just what works for me.

5. Detoxing slowly:

Whenever I take a strong detox formula, such as a total system cleanse or a colon cleanse program, I start even more slowly than with singles or tonic formulas and build up to maximum dosage. I try to begin at a time when I can rest—at least for the first two days after I start. I also skip a day every week or so, to give my body time to rest and renew.

In addition, I add tonic herbs like lemon balm to support my body and keep my energy level high. Drinking lots of water (and, even more important, spreading that water throughout the day so that I drink some at least every two hours) is a definite focus for me.

Taking more showers helps my skin eliminate more and reduces the chance of skin eruption from toxins being released. Brisk towel rubs are also something I do when cleansing, to help the skin release and to stimulate circulation and blood flow on the skin surface.

6. Mixing and matching:

I have learned to be a little cautious about adding several different formulas into my system at once. If I were under a doctor's care for a pre-existing condition, I would think it most advisable to consult with

my doctor before adding any herbal medicines to the system.

In general, I have learned (through experience) not to add more than two new formulas at a time. It's what works for me. By honoring what your body tells you, you can determine what is safe for you. Using more than one formula is sometimes perfect, and appropriate. If we learn to listen to the Spirit of our body, we will know. Until then, it might be wiser to err on the side of caution by using only one new formula at a time or by working with a wellness counselor and monitoring our body system closely during the first few days of any new addition to our regimen.

7. Hearing the spiritual message:

Experience has taught me, to the point that it is absolute Truth for me, that our physical bodies are a kind of diagnostic tool for our spiritual selves. If we are living in balance, in accordance with what is true and progressive for our path, keeping our minds positive and our emotions cleared, we will not manifest illness. It is when we are out of spiritual balance that the physical warnings appear.

I have learned not to look so much at why any ingested ingredient causes imbalance but why I chose to take it in the first place. This is decidedly a metaphysical approach to self-treatment and I realize it isn't for everyone!

Working with herbs is a wonderful journey into natural health and wellness that, when approached with respect, responsibility and a sense of exploration can yield dividends for the rest of your days. I believe herbs provide a viable supplementation to traditional medicines and, for some like myself, are the

preferred method of treatment. We're all adults here. Make wise choices; choices which work for you. Self treatment requires self-responsibility and monitoring. Don't try it if you aren't willing to explore, expand and learn what may now be new to you.

Neva is a wellness counselor, reflexologist, herbalist and Reiki Master. Having studied herbs extensively for years, she brings an intuitive and spiritually based wisdom to working with plant medicines. She is webmaster of the health, wellness and Spirit portal at <http://www.healthynewage.com>

Herbs: Growing Your Own

By Andy Wiley

The first thing you need to do when deciding to create your own Herb Garden is to decide on the size of the plot of land you want to use. This will depend on what herbs and how much you want to grow. Unless you are an experienced gardener or a herb fanatic don't make your plot too big at first. Remember, you can always add to it later. You can create a raised bed to grow your herbs in and always add more when you decide you need to grow more. Remember to plan out your planting sequence and keep records of what is planted where as well as marking your planting with plastic nametags.

You need to remember that most herbs usually like well-drained soil so start your bed with a good layer of gravel that will help drainage. Place your soil on top of this but remember to add some compost into this. If you have a free draining soil to start with you should be able to manage without the gravel. Make sure your plot is in full sun as many herbs originate in the Mediterranean region.

Most herbs can be sown from seed so you can buy these from your local nursery. You can also buy small plants for transplanting but there is nothing more satisfying than doing all the work yourself so try to grow from seed first. If you don't succeed then try small plants later but remember to read the label, as some plants such as coriander do not transplant very well.

Remember that you can also grow many herbs in small tubs or window boxes and can even grow them on your windowsill. Try planting Basil over the winter as long as it is indoors as Basil is a frost tender plant and will die after a single light frost. You can also try starting your seeds off early in the year to plant out as soon as the risk of frost has passed. An early start will give you herbs for longer. If you plant out too early you can always try covering your tender plants with fleece to keep the frosts off. If you live in a frost-free place, get cracking now.

Andy Wiley is a budding gardener, chef and internet writer. Check out his new site at

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