

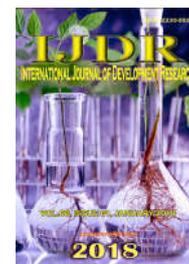


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HERBAL MEDICINES: NATURE'S GIFT

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ABSTRACT

Herbal medicine also called as botanical medicine or phytomedicine refers to using a plant's seeds, berries, roots, leaves, bark, or flowers for medicinal purposes. Plants are rich source of medicine in developing countries. 80% of the world's population relies on traditional medicines to maintain its health. Satpuda range covering entire Khandesh region has a tremendous wealth of medicinal plants. Even today the tribals inhabiting these regions like the Bhills, Gavits, Padvis, Tadvish & Valvis tribes are exclusively dependent on forests & have their own system of herbal medicine. The increasing emphasis on research in Ayurveda & utilization of medicinal herbs to reduce the side effects of modern medicines demand a greater necessity to explore this vast wealth of crude drugs. This paper throws light on the value of herbal medicine in treating and preventing diseases which may help enlighten the path to herbal health choices.

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INTRODUCTION

Plants had been used for medicinal purposes long before recorded history. Ancient Chinese and Egyptian papyrus writings describe medicinal uses for plants as early as 3,000 BC. Indigenous cultures (such as African and Native American) used herbs in their healing rituals, while others developed traditional medical systems (such as Ayurveda and Traditional Chinese Medicine) in which herbal therapies were used¹. Researchers found that people in different parts of the world tended to use the same or similar plants for the same purposes. In the early 19th century, when chemical analysis first became available, scientists began to extract and modify the active ingredients from plants. Later, chemists began making their own version of plant compounds and, over time, the use of herbal medicines declined in favor of drugs. Almost one fourth of pharmaceutical drugs are derived from botanicals. Recently, the World Health Organization estimated that 80% of people worldwide rely on herbal medicines for some part of their primary health care.

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In Germany, about 600 - 700 plant based medicines are available and are prescribed by some 70% of German physicians. In the past 20 years in the United States, public dissatisfaction with the cost of prescription medications, combined with an interest in returning to natural or organic remedies, has led to an increase in herbal medicine use. Ayurveda, the ancient medical system of India, is a holistic system that encompasses the healing of the body, mind and spirit through diet, lifestyle and cleansing. Medicinal plants and herbs of India accompany these procedures. The tradition of Ayurveda extends back more than five thousand years and is still widely practiced in present day India.

Herbs: Mechanism of Action and Mode of Use:

In many cases, scientists are not sure what specific ingredient in a particular herb works to treat a condition or illness. Whole herbs contain many ingredients, and they may work together to produce a beneficial effect. Many factors determine how effective an herb will be. For example, the type of environment (climate, bugs, soil quality) in which a plant grew will affect it, as will how and when it was harvested and processed². The use of herbal supplements has increased dramatically over the past 30 years.

Herbal supplements are classified as dietary supplements. That means herbal supplements unlike prescription drugs can be sold without being tested to prove they are safe and effective. However, herbal supplements must be made according to good manufacturing practices. Often, herbs may be used together because the combination is more effective and may have fewer side effects. Health care providers must take many factors into account when recommending herbs, including the species and variety of the plant, the plant's habitat, how it was stored and processed, and whether or not there are contaminants (including heavy metals and pesticides).

The Role of Conventional Medicine in a Healthy Life

Conventional or traditional medicine has an illness-based approach to health - we rarely visit a physician to simply be healthier. We only attend our doctor's surgery when we have symptoms of some kind, and not if we simply wish to improve and optimize our health. So, unfortunately, today's standard medical approach is not health centered. While it undoubtedly has highly complex technologic tools for diagnosing the health problems, and a multitude of synthetic chemical compounds to battle with disease symptoms, it nevertheless, it has little help to offer is in reaching optimum health.

Taking a Holistic View with Medicinal Herbs

Herbal medicine treats the human body in a holistic way, and does not approach each part of the body in isolation. Illness is the result of an imbalance in the whole person, and unlike in standard medicine, all the various parts of a medicinal herb are used in treating the person, illustrating again the holistic nature of this approach. This approach does not focus on illness alone; rather the goal is to create optimum health, and well-being and to prevent disease from developing.

Potential Danger in Using Herbs

Many health experts warn us about the potential dangers to our health of herbal medicines, pointing out that natural does not mean "safe". This is, of course, very true. Natural does not mean that we can use any medicinal herb indiscriminately. We must respect the efficacy of these substances as we would any prescription medication. Natural simply means that, when used wisely, these herbs will work on human body in a harmonious way. They have the natural ability to help the body to heal illnesses and prevent possible diseases by strengthening the body's own healing power. We need the introduction of some basic usage guidelines for herbs and herbal supplement products in order to eliminate any risk (Nutritional Supplements Health Guide). While we might generally say that herbal medicines are safer than conventional drugs, we should still guard against any potential pitfalls by using these products wisely.

Enumeration of Some Important Herbal Medicines (Mishal, 1998; Badgular, 2008; Firdos, 2011)

- *Boerhaavia diffusa* (*Nyctaginaceae*): Commonly known as rakta punarnava or hog weed Punarnava contains alkaloids punarnavine & punarnavoside, an antifibrotic agent. It is mainly used as diuretic & as an expectorant. Punarnava is stomachic & is prescribed in the treatment of jaundice.

- *Gloriosa superba* (*Liliaceae*): Commonly known as Gloriosa or glory lily. The dried tubers which is used contains colchicine along with its different derivatives in minor quantities. It is mainly used in the treatment of Gout & inflammation.
- *Curculigo orchoides* (*Amaryllidaceae*): Commonly known as kali musali or American ginseng. The dried rhizomes mainly used as drug contains starch, tannins, enzymes & glycoside Curculigoside & syringic acid. It is mainly used in the treatment of skin disorders, jaundice, as an aphrodisiac, decreased sperm count, general body weakness.
- *Tinospora cordifolia* (*Menispermaceae*): Commonly known as Guduchi. The stems used as drug contains diterpene compounds including tinosporone, tinosporic acid, cordifolisides A to E, syringen, the yellow alkaloid, berberine. It is used as a hepatoprotective & immunomodulatory agent.
- *Terminalia bellirica* (*Combretaceae*): Commonly known as Baheda. The dried ripe fruits used as drug contains 32% tannins, colouring matter, gallic acid, ellagic acid, gum & sugar. It is used as an astringent, demulcent & in preparation of soap. Also used in dyspepsia & diarrhoea.
- *Holarrhena antidysenterica* (*Apocynaceae*): Commonly known as Kurchi. The dried stem bark used as drug contains C₂₁ group steroidal alkaloids including kurchicine, nor conessine, isoconessine, holarrhime & holarrhidine. It is used as antiprotozoal in activity & used to treat amoebic dysentery.
- *Tribulus terrestris* (*Zygophyllaceae*): Commonly known as Puncture vine. The dried ripe fruits used as drug contains alkaloids harmine & harman. It also contains saponins, flavonoids, fixed oil, resin & traces of essential oil. Fruits are used diuretic, tonic & also in the treatment of calculus affections & painful micuritions.
- *Eclipta alba* (*Asteraceae*): Commonly known as Bhringaraj. It mainly contains coumestans, alkaloids, thiopenes, flavonoids, polyacetylenes, triterpenes and their glycosides. It has traditional external uses, such as for athlete's foot, eczema and dermatitis, and on the scalp to address hair loss. It is reported to improve hair growth and color.
- *Cassia fistula* (*Fabaceae*): Commonly known as Indian labernum or golden shower tree. Its main chemical components are anthraquinones, fistulic acid, rhein, rheinglucoside, sennosides A and B, phlobaphenes, emodin, chrysophanic acid, fistuacacidin, lupeol, beta-sitosterol and hexacosanol. It is used as purgative.
- *Termanalia arjuna* (*Combretaceae*): Commonly known as Arjun. The bark which is used as medicine mainly contains tannins & triterpenoid saponins. It is mainly used as cardi tonic.

Conclusion

When you introduce herbs into your life, you can use them in their natural form or as an herbal mixture. You can also promote your health by choosing herbal supplements products. Using medicinal herbs in any form will be beneficial to your health. And while neither nutritional nor herbal supplements can replace the nutritional benefits of eating a healthy balanced diet, nutritional supplements that include herbal extracts, used as a part of a healthy lifestyle can bring you one step closer to reaching optimum health.

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