Taking the Natural Approach With Herbal Therapies for Lupus

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Using Herbs for Lupus Symptoms

Living with lupus comes with a long list of medications and harsh side effects, often worse than the symptoms themselves. The use of herbs is on the rise as people find themselves dissatisfied with modern healthcare.

History of Herbal Medicine

Ancient cultures around the world used to plant seeds, berries, roots, leaves, bark, or flowers to treat and prevent disease. Herbal medicine, also known as botanical medicine, has been traced as far back as ancient China, 3000 B.C.

Herbal medicine has informed many of the medical breakthroughs of modern medicine. According to 'Herbal Medicine: Biomolecular and Clinical Aspects - 2nd edition', 25% of prescribed drugs are derived from plant compounds.

Who Has Herb Knowledge?

Using herbs for healing is a practice found in all kinds of alternative medicine.

Here are five types of practitioners who have expertise in herbs:

Herbalist

An herbalist is specially trained in the field of herbal medicine. Herbalists have a very focused practice consisting of plant-based modes of healing and prevention, whereas other kinds of alternative practitioners use other treatments as well.

Traditional Chinese Medicine

The National Centre for Complementary and Integrative Health states that Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) “encompasses many different practices, including acupuncture, moxibustion (burning an herb above the skin to apply heat to acupuncture points), Chinese herbal medicine, tui na (Chinese therapeutic massage), dietary therapy, and tai chi and qi gong (practices that combine specific movements or postures, coordinated breathing, and mental focus).”

TCM is a holistic approach to health and healing, tending to the mind, body and spirit.

Homeopath

Homeopaths use remedies made from natural sources such as plants and minerals. According to the National

Centre for Homeopathy, “it is its own unique therapeutic system… and should not be confused with herbal medicine, Chinese medicine, or other types of natural medicines.”

Ayurvedic Medicine

Originating in ancient India, Ayurvedic medicine is one of the oldest systems of medicine in the world. The National Centre for Complementary and Integrative Health describes Ayurvedic practices as follows:

“Ayurvedic physicians prescribe individualized treatments, including compounds of herbs or proprietary ingredients, and diet, exercise, and lifestyle recommendations.”

Naturopaths

Naturopathic doctors have a minimum of seven years of post-secondary education and prescribe natural therapies:

- Botanical medicine
- Clinical nutrition
- Hydrotherapy
- Homeopathy
- Naturopathic manipulation
- Traditional Chinese medicine/acupuncture
- Lifestyle counseling
- Health promotion
- Disease prevention

Checking a practitioner’s credentials is critical to your safety. Make sure they are registered practitioners and have recognized certification.

Pros and Cons of Herbs for Lupus

The safe use of herbs has been known to minimize and prevent symptoms in some individuals. Herbs can provide support while weaning off medications and possibly limit the need for additional medications.

Some common herbs are affordable, can be grown at home, and are easily found in grocery or drug stores.

The cost of some herbs can be high and coverage of alternative practitioner visits are limited and not universal.

According to the University of Maryland Medical Centre, herbal supplements, unlike prescription drugs, can be sold without being tested. Therefore, they have not been proven safe and effective.

Many herbs have healing attributes, but there is also the potential for dangerous drug reactions. It is important to let your physician/rheumatologist know of your plans before starting a herbal treatment.

Next page: Red flags when using herbs for lupus.

Herbal Red Flags For Lupus

Two of the most well known herbal interactions for lupus involve Echinacea and St. John’s Wart.

People with an autoimmune disease should not use Echinacea, an immune stimulant known for stopping an oncoming cold in its tracks. According to the Lupus Foundation of America, there is evidence that it can cause lupus nephritis flares, low white blood cell counts, liver inflammation and can interfere with immunosuppressant drugs.

St John’s Wart is a natural mood regulator, often used to treat depression. Unfortunately, it is also known for drug interactions and may cause increased sun sensitivity, which is already a problematic lupus symptom.

There could be other herbs that should not be paired with your medications or could induce symptoms. Do the research, consult professionals and get informed!

A Note on Medical Marijuana

There are some countries that allow marijuana to be used medically to treat nausea, pain and other symptoms. Made from the dried leaves and buds of the Cannabis sativa plant, it is available as an oil or a pill, but can also be smoked, inhaled, or eaten.

Laws vary regarding this controversial herb known primarily for its recreational use. The Lupus Foundation of America “supports further research on the use of medical marijuana for treating and alleviating the symptoms of lupus.”

The LFA also “strongly recommends that those with lupus engage their doctors in a frank conversations about medical marijuana before considering its use for lupus.”

Taking Baby Steps

The amount of information on herbs and how to safely integrate them into your health plan can be intimidating. Take your time and make sure you find the alternative health practitioner who is right for you.

If you are looking for a way to take a baby step into the world of herbs, remember that the main component of herbal medicine is readily available in your grocery store. Sometimes the symptom support you need is in your cupboard!

Here are three examples of anti-inflammatory herb power that you can find at your corner store:

Cayenne Pepper

This spicy herb contains a compound called capsaicin, which is effective in treating pain caused by inflammation. Add some healing heat to your eggs, marinades and dips.

Turmeric

This dark orange herb is an anti-inflammatory superstar and a great go-to when suffering from joint pain. Mix half a teaspoon in warm milk for a soothing, restorative drink.

Ginger

This root hinders the production of toxic-free radicals and pro-inflammatory compounds. It can also be used as a remedy for nausea caused by lupus headaches or medication side effects.

Steep freshly cut ginger in hot water to make a healing tea or add it to your stir-fries and soup.

Finding Balance

Many people with lupus have found a safe and healthy balance that consists of taking prescribed medicines while also taking herbs to help minimize symptoms. Taking the time to do research and consulting with knowledgeable herbal practitioners as well as your physician is the key to finding what will work best for you.