

The Use of Herbs For Treating Chronic Back Pain: A Materia Medica

by David Winston, RH (AHG)



David Winston is an herbalist and ethnobotanist with over 32 years of training in Cherokee, Chinese and Western herbal traditions. He is an internationally known lecturer and teaches frequently at medical schools, symposia and herb conferences. In addition, David is a founding/professional member of the American Herbalists Guild.

It is estimated that more than 65 million Americans (mostly aged 30-60) experience back pain every year, with studies showing that four of five adults will experience moderate to severe back pain at least once in their lifetime. Back pain is the single largest cause for

worker absenteeism in the developed world and in terms of lost productivity and medical expenses, the cost is astounding; tens of billions of dollars annually. The personal human cost of chronic pain, loss of mobility, and reduced quality of life is immeasurable.

Specific herbs for back and neck pain and related conditions

Black Cohosh root (*Cimicifuga racemosa*)

Used for muscular arthralgias (fibromyalgia) where the pain is increased with muscular contraction and with a deep, constant, dull sense of soreness.

Tincture (1:2): 1-1.5 ml TID

Solomon's Seal rhizome (*Polygonatum biflorum*)

Used to enhance the stability and integrity of vertebral discs and other cartilage, as well as overstretched tendons and ligaments.

Tincture: (1:2) 1-2 ml TID

Tea: 1 tsp dried rhizome, 8 oz water, decoct 10-15 minutes, steep 45 minutes, take 4 oz BID/TID

Wood Betony herb (*Pedicularis spp.*)

For tired, sore muscles caused by overwork, spasm, or trauma. It is effective with Arnica for occasional back pain.

Tincture: (1:2) 1.5-2.5 ml TID

Tea: 1-2 tsp dried herb, 8 oz hot water, let steep 15-20 minutes, take 4 oz. TID

St. John's wort flowering tops (*Hypericum perforatum*)

For nerve pain, especially of the spinal chord and neck. Nerve impingement, brachial nerve pain.

Tincture (1:2 or 1:5) 2-4 ml QID

Butterbur rhizome (*Petasites hybridus*)

Butterbur is a powerful antiinflammatory, antispasmodic, and analgesic. It is effective for muscle spasms, torticollis, brachial nerve pain, as well as migraines. See footnote above for warning about toxic PA content.

Tincture – PA free: (1:5) 1-2 ml QID

Teasel root (*Dipsacus asper*)

Used in Chinese medicine for low back pain, sacroiliac pain, and narrowing of vertebral discs. Teasel is antiinflammatory and can be of benefit for arthritis pain, tendonitis, and bursitis.

Tincture: (1:5) 2-3 ml TID

Tea: 1 tsp dried root, 8 oz water, decoct 10-15 minutes, steep 45 minutes, take 4 oz TID

Kava root (*Piper methysticum*)

For spasmodic pain, tight contracted muscles with anxiety, back or neck pain, torticollis, fibromyalgia (use with ashwagandha and black cohosh).

Tincture: (1:5) 2-3 ml QID

Skunk Cabbage root (*Symplocarpus foetidus*)

For back spasms worsened by coughing.

Tincture: (1:2) .5-.75 ml, diluted in juice or water, TID

Guaiac wood/resin (*Guaiacum officinale*)

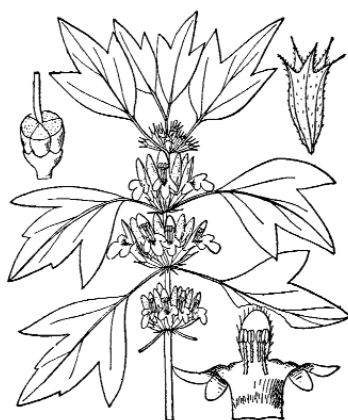
A powerful antiinflammatory agent effective for osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, and Lyme arthralgia (use with Teasel root).

Tincture: (1:5) 1-2 ml TID

Jamaica Dogwood bark (*Piscidia piscipula*)

This is one of the stronger herbal analgesics, relieving pain and spasms associated with brachial nerve pain, pinched nerves, and torticollis.

Tincture: (1:5) .25-1 ml TID



Illustrations © USDA, NRCS, 2005. The PLANTS Database, Version 3.5 (<http://plants.usda.gov>). Data compiled from various sources by Mark W. Skinner, National Plant Data Center, Baton Rouge, LA 70874-4490 USA.

General herbs for back and neck pain and related conditions

Antiinflammatory herbs Antiinflammatory herbs are milder than prescription antiinflammatory medications. They may take longer to work, but are significantly less likely to cause gastric bleeding or liver disease. In addition, many of these herbs are antioxidants and circulatory stimulants.

Bupleurum root	Ginger rhizome	Sarsaparilla rhizome	Boswellia gum/resin
Devil's Claw tuber	Turmeric rhizome	Yucca root	Celery seed
Goldenrod herb	Guaiac wood/resin	St. John's wort flowers	Licorice rhizome

Analgesics Analgesics relieve pain and often inhibit inflammation as well.

Willow bark	Mulberry bark	Black Birch bark
Wintergreen herb	Gelsemium herb*	Indian Pipe root
Jamaica Dogwood bark	Meadowsweet herb	Corydalis tuber
Ash tree bark	Poplar bark	Clematis root

Antispasmodics Antispasmodics relieve spasm and pain. Many herbal antispasmodics are also sedatives.

Black Haw bark	Skunk Cabbage root	Kudzu root
Stephania root	Cramp Bark	Corydalis tuber
Butterbur (Petasites) rootΔ	Valerian root	Kava root
Black Cohosh root	White Peony root	Roman Chamomile flowers
Gambir spines	California Poppy root	Lobelia herb/seed

Nervines and sedatives Nervines and sedatives* are used to reduce stress and decrease muscle tension.

Motherwort herb	Lemon Balm herb	Betony/Stachys herb
Lavender flower	Passion Flower herb	Yuan Zhi/Polygala root
Hops strobiles*	California Poppy root*	Wood Betony herb
Chamomile flower	Linden Flower/Valerian root*	He Huan Pi/Albizia bark
Scullcap herb	Zizyphs seed*	Wild Lettuce leaf/Lactucarium*
Gambir spines*	Fresh Oat extract	Blue Vervain herb

Kidney yin and/or yang tonics TCM Kidney yin and/or yang tonics are often used to treat lower back pain and sciatica.

Ba Ji Tian/Morinda root	Sang Ji Sheng/Loranthus herb	Niu Xi/Achyranthes root
Fenugreek seed	Rou Cong Rong/Cistanche herb	Yin Yang Huo/Epimedium leaf
Du Zhong/Eucommia bark	Shan Zhu Yu/Dogwood Fruit	
Suo Yang/Cynomorium herb	Gu Sui Bu/Drynaria root	

* Toxic: use only under the guidance of a trained clinician.

According to the theories of Darwinian medicine, human beings are poorly designed to maintain an upright posture for the 70+ years most of us will live. It is only recently on a biological scale – the last 3-400,000 years – that we have fully abandoned four legs for two. To be truly well suited to an upright posture we would need thicker vertebral discs, a change in posture, and several other evolutionary adjustments. This, of course, is not going to occur anytime in the next millennium or two, so we are left with a significant result – chronic back pain.

In addition to structural/design flaws, chronic back pain can also be caused by physical injury, psychological

stress, poor posture, aging, disease (osteoarthritis, ankylosing spondylitis, fibromyalgia, degenerative disc disease), and birth defects. Of all these causes, psychological stress, physical injury, and disease (especially in the elderly) are the most common triggers. The conventional wisdom of both the lay public and the medical profession is that back pain is a primarily physical condition; recent research and clinical experience suggests otherwise. Dr John Sarno, in his groundbreaking book, *Mind Over Back Pain*, clearly shows that much of the chronic back and neck pain people experience are triggered by stress. He notes that 50% of back pain patients have no detectable physical

Topical Applications

Arnica flowers (*Arnica montana*)

Best in massage oils, mixed with Lavender essential oil and Hypericum oil. The combination improves the beneficial effects of massage by increasing circulation and decreasing pain and inflammation.

Witch Hazel bark/leaf (*Hamamelis virginiana*)

Distilled Witch Hazel can be used as a compress or in baths to reduce soreness, hematomas, and trauma injuries.

Ginger rhizome (*Zingiber officinalis*)

Ginger can be infused in a carrier oil or used in baths to increase circulation and decrease inflammation. It is most effective for cold/damp arthralgias, and old injuries with scar tissue and impaired circulation.

Balm of Gilead buds (*Populus balsamifera*)

Can be infused in oil to make a beautifully scented, warming application. It is most effective for cold/damp arthritis and neuralgias.

Chaparral herb (*Larrea tridentata*)

Baths of Chaparral have long been used in the Southwest for pain caused by inflammation, arthritis, and trauma injuries. Patients should be forewarned that they will have a distinctive aroma after a chaparral bath and some people can develop rashes from this herb.

Medicine Sage herb (*Artemisia ludoviciana*)

Baths of this herb are effective for muscle and joint pain as well as backaches and osteoarthritis.

Hypericum Oil (*Hypericum perforatum*)

Made from the flowers and buds of St. John's wort, when properly prepared the oil should be a blood red color and have a distinctive aromatic scent. The oil can be used as in massage for nerve pain and nerve injuries. Can be combined with arnica oil, lavender essential oil, or yarrow infused oil for increased efficacy.

Lobelia seed (*Lobelia inflata*)

The infused oil made from Lobelia seed is a superb topical antispasmodic. It is useful for muscle spasms, body armor, whiplash, and torticollis.

Capsaicin

is a phytochemical extract from cayenne (*Capsicum annuum*) that is effective for temporary relief of muscle pain and arthritis. It depletes Substance P from the nerve endings interfering with the transmission of feelings of pain. Cloves also inhibit Substance P.

A substantial number of essential oils (EO) have topical analgesic activity and can be used in massage oils to help relieve pain. These include EO Sweet Birch, EO Wintergreen, EO Juniper, EO Lavender, EO Chamomile.

Specific herbs for sciatica

Sweet Melilot herb (*Melilotus spp.*)

For treatment of spasmodic neuralgia, with impaired circulation, sharp, stabbing pain in the eye, ovary, or hips.

Use it with Hypericum.

Tincture: (1:2.5) 1.5 – 2.5 ml TID

Bai Zhu root (*Atractylodes macrocephala*)

Used in TCM formulas to relieve cold/damp arthralgias (bi-pain). It benefits sacroiliac pain that is worse in cold or damp weather with pain radiating down the legs (sciatica).

Tincture: (1:5) 1-2 ml TID/QID

Tea: 1 tsp dried root, 8 oz water, decoct 10 minutes (covered) and steep 45 minutes, take 4 oz TID

Prickly Ash bark (*Zanthoxylum clava-herculis*)

For cold extremities with nerve pain-sciatica, peripheral neuropathies, and Reynaud's Syndrome.

Tincture: (1:5) .5 – 1 ml TID

Horsechestnut seed (*Aesculus hippocastanum*)

For sciatic pain with a feeling of throbbing fullness, impaired circulation, and edema.

Tincture: (1:2) .5-1 ml TID

St. John's wort flowering tops (*Hypericum perforatum*)

For nerve pain, especially of the spinal chord and neck; nerve impingement, brachial nerve pain, and sciatica.

Tincture (1:2 or 1:5) 2-4 ml QID

Specific herbs for neck pain and whiplash

Kudzu root (*Peuraria spp.*)

This is an antispasmodic specific for torticollis (wry neck).

Tincture: (1:5) 2-4 ml QID

Tea: 1 tsp dried root, 8 oz water, decoct 15 minutes, steep 45 minutes, take 1-2 cups per day

Lungwort lichen (*Stricta pulmonaria*)

For pain in the shoulders, back of neck and occiput, with quick, darting pains. Pain associated with coughing, intercostal pain (use with Black Haw).

Tincture: (1:5) 1/2–1 gtt. every 2 hours

Ox-knee root (*Achyranthes bidentata*)

An antiinflammatory and analgesic used in TCM for painful ligaments, tendons, and joints. It is also used for low back pain (SI joints), whiplash injuries, and bursitis, especially of the shoulders and neck. Use it with Fang Feng root and clematis root.

Tincture: (1:5) 2-3 ml QID

Tea: 1 tsp dried root, 8 oz water, decoct 5 minutes, steep 40 minute, take 4 oz TID

Butterbur (*Petasites hybridus*)

Petasites is a powerful antispasmodic, analgesic, and antiinflammatory useful for muscle spasms, neck pain, whiplash, and migraines caused by neck trauma. See footnote above for warning about toxic PA content.

Tincture – PA free: (1:5) 1-2 ml QID

Passion Flower herb (*Passiflora incarnata*)

Passiflora is specific for neuralgic neck pain or whiplash with headache, insomnia, and irritability. Use with Jamaica dogwood.

Tincture: (1:2 or 1:5) 1.5-2 ml QID

Tea: 1 tsp dried herb, 8 oz hot water, steep 30-40 minutes, take 1-2 cups per day

Corydalis tuber (*Corydalis yanhusuo*)

Yan Hu Suo is used in TCM for stagnation of blood with pain. Trauma injuries with bruising or swelling. It can be used topically and orally for whiplash, torticollis, muscle, and back pain.

Tincture: (1:5) 1-2 ml QID

St. John's wort flowering tops (*Hypericum perforatum*)

Hypericum can be used topically and orally for whiplash, to relieve nerve inflammation and pain as well as induce healing.

Tincture: (1:2 or 1:5) 2-4 ml QID

Arnica flowers (*Arnica montana*)

Useful for traumatic injuries – whiplash, strains, concussions of the spine and bruised muscles (use with St. John's wort).

Tincture: (1:2) 1-2 gtt. TID

Rue herb (*Ruta graveolens*)

Used for tissue that feels bruised, bone trauma from sudden impact, the eyes are light sensitive and hurt.

Tincture: (1:5) 1-2 gtt. TID

Homeopathic: 3-6x

Kava root (*Piper methysticum*)

A muscle relaxant and anxiolytic agent useful for tension stored in the neck and shoulders. Use kava for muscle pain, tension induced headaches, and torticollis.

Tincture: (1:5) 1.5-2.5 ml QID

defects such as a bulging disc, and 50% of the people with bulging discs have no back pain.

Conventional treatment for chronic back/muscle and neck pain offers some relief, but all too often the results are temporary. Standard therapies mostly involve the use of pharmaceuticals, physical therapy, and surgery.

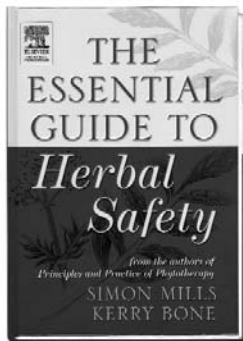
Herbal approaches to back pain

The use of herbal medicine for treating back pain can be a significant part of a successful protocol, but herbs alone are unlikely to be curative. Herbalists use many of the same categories of medications that orthodox medicine uses -analgesics (*Salix spp*, *Filipendula ulmaria*, *Piscidea piscipula*), anti-inflammatories (*Hypericum perforatum*, *Curcuma longa*, *Smilax spp.*, *Guaiacum officinale*, *Bupleurum falcatum*, *Harpagophytum procubens*), and antispasmodics (*Cimicifuga racemosa*, *Petasites hybridus*1, *Piper methysticum*, *Symplocarpus foetidus*). If stress is a causative factor for chronic back and neck pain, then

nervines, sedatives, herbal antidepressants, and adaptogens should also be considered.

Bibliography

- Cabrera C 2000, *Fibromyalgia: The Path To Healing. Medicines From The Earth Proceedings*. Herb Education Services, Ashland, OR
- Micozzi M 2001, *Fundamentals of Complementary and Alternative Medicine*. Churchill Livingstone, New York
- Neiderkorn J 1905, *A Handy Reference Book – Specific Indications For Remedies*. Lloyd Brothers, Cincinnati
- Sarno J 1999, *Mind Over Back Pain*. Berkley Pub, Berkeley
- Stansbury J 1999, *Botanical and Natural Therapies For Neuralgic Conditions. Medicines From The Earth Proceedings*. Herb Education Services, Ashland, OR
- Wheeler A, Stubbart J 2002, *Pathophysiology of Chronic Back Pain*, eMedicine. Available at www.emedicine.com/neuro/topic516.htm
- Winston D 2004, *Chinese Materia Medica*, HTSBM, Washington, NJ
- Winston D 2004, *Ayurvedic Materia Medica*, HTSBM, Washington, NJ
- Winston D 2004, *Native American Materia Medica*, HTSBM, Washington, NJ



The Essential Guide to Herbal Safety

by Assoc. Prof. Kerry Bone, B.Sc. (Hons.), Dip. Phyto., FNIMH, FNHAA, MCPP
and Simon Mills MA, MCPP, FNIMH, Peninsula Medical School USA,
Universities of Exeter and Plymouth, UK

**The first accurate and comprehensive book on herbal safety
– a must for all health care professionals!**

This innovative new book presents an extensive discussion of the principles and current major issues relating to herbal safety. Leading international experts contribute to the book providing a wealth of information on issues such as quality, interactions, adverse reactions, toxicity, allergy, contact sensitivity and idiosyncratic reactions.

Key features:

- Authoritative and credible safety information from two experienced health care professionals specializing in herbal therapy together with leading world experts.
- 125 well-researched monographs - the most thorough and comprehensive text on the market for herbal safety in practice.
- Current evidence-based reviews covering factors that influence herb safety and quality, including the negative placebo effects (nocebo), various types of unpredictable effects, the basis for interactions between herbs and drugs.
- Establishes a grading system for assessing safety in pregnancy and lactation that is realistic and appropriate to herb use.
- Thoroughly critiques the dominant misinformation in the media and medical journals on herb safety issues.
- Useful appendices detailing herbal references for pregnancy and lactation considerations.

To order "The Essential Guide to Herbal Safety", please contact Standard Process® Customer Service at 800-558-8740.

MEDI HERB
INNOVATIVE HERBAL SOLUTIONS