

The use of *Filipendula* and prescribing for arthritis by medical herbalists

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This clinical audit comprised the fifth NIMH review of practice. It consisted of two loosely related sections. In the first, practitioners answered questions on how they use *Filipendula ulmaria*, and in the second, practitioners submitted prescriptions they had used for people with arthritis. Many thanks to the people who sent back questionnaires

Use of *Filipendula*

Fifty-six out of 57 respondents currently use *Filipendula* in their practice. All the respondents said they were likely to use *Filipendula* for digestive problems, four mentioning its use for diarrhoea in particular. Some emphasised its usefulness for children: in diarrhoea, fever or as a general nervine. Some commented on its use for pain in general, and for migraine, flu, nausea from chemotherapy, hangovers and 'dietary indiscretion'.

Eight respondents said they use it explicitly for its salicylate content, but 22 said they did not. Many considered this to be a minor aspect of its action.

Filipendula is clearly a much appreciated herb: 49 respondents had something particular they wanted to say about it. Three responses recurred frequently

- it is generally very well tolerated, versatile and effective, gentle and reliable
- it is especially helpful in the commonly combined situation of arthritic and gut problems;
- its beauty, scent and taste.

Almost a third of respondents used *Filipendula* as a simple, and mainly as a tea. However, over half had favourite combinations, depending on the condition (see Table 2).

Contraindications/side-effects

Two practitioners reported that *Filipendula* had caused or worsened constipation. Two mentioned the need for care when it is used alongside orthodox anticoagulant agents. One person suspected

Table 1: Uses of *Filipendula*

	likely to use	not used	no response
Digestive problems	57		
Arthritis	51	3	3
Urinary disorders	20	34	3

it of causing nausea in one patient, and another of causing tinnitus.

Form and dosage

Most prescriptions used between 10–100ml of either the tincture, fresh tincture or fluid extract. Nearly half the respondents used 20ml or more per week, and eight used 25ml or more. One prescription was for 100ml fresh juice and three were for between 3–100gm dried herb for infusion.

A third of the practitioners collected *Filipendula* from the wild at least part of the time. Despite the many comments on *Filipendula*'s wonderful smell, only two people used it externally – one person makes a macerated oil.

Prescribing for arthritis

Prescriptions

The respondents provided 45 prescriptions for arthritis. The age of the patients treated ranged between 17 and 84. Thirty-four patients had orthodox diagnoses. The majority of these were osteoarthritis (12), followed by rheumatoid arthritis (8), then arthritis (7), ankylosing spondylitis (3), Reiter's syndrome (2), polymyalgia rheumatica (1) and repetitive strain injury (1).

The main presenting symptoms were stiffness and swelling. Pain was also mentioned. The knee was the most mentioned joint (14), then neck, hip

Table 2: Favourite combinations

Condition	<i>Filipendula</i> with one or more of
Arthritis with gastro-intestinal problems	Chamomilla, Harpagophytum, <i>Mentha piperita</i> , Salix
Gastritis	Althaea, Chamomilla, Glycyrrhiza, or Calendula, less commonly Valeriana, Acorus, Anthemum, Agrimonia, <i>Aloe vera</i> and Symphytum.
Arthritis	Harpagophytum, Salix, Apium, Menyanthes, Bryonia - (no recurring combinations)
Urinary disorders	Zea, Althaea, Barosma and Solidago

Table 3 Herbs frequently used in the prescriptions	
Herb	Amount/for
Zingiber	(1-6ml Tr)
Urtica	(3 as a tea)
Zanthosylu	(5-15ml Tr)
Salix	
Cimicifug	
Taraxacum radix	
Harpagophytum	
Apium	(8 mlTr to 20ml FE p.w.)
Filipendula	(10ml Tr to 20ml FE p.w.)

and shoulder (6 mentions each) and thumb, wrist and fingers (3 mentions each).

Herbs used in the prescriptions

Practitioners listed 70 anti-inflammatory herbs and 31 circulatory stimulants. Of these, besides familia herbs of the Western materia medica, there were three uses of *Curcuma longa* (turmeric), in one cas as a simple, and one of bupleurum. Eight respondents specified relying on *Apium graveolens*, *Urtica dioica* or Filipendula to aid removing uri acid.

The herbs most frequently cited in the pre- scriptions are listed in table 3, ranging from Zingibe in 20% of prescriptions to Filipendula in 50% (see Table 3).

The great majority of prescriptions were straightforward in their strategy, relying on a combination of anti-inflammatory, alterative/ eliminative and circulatory herbs. Doses were fre- quently a little higher than the average 5ml tds, at least initially. I include three of the prescriptions below.

Prescription 1

Galium
Taraxacum radi
Scutellaria
Guaiacum

5ml three times a day

This simple and successful prescription was given by a practitioner to a patient with early onset rheumatoid arthritis. The symptoms were inflammation and pain in the proximal interphalangeal and metacarpal phalangeal joints. The patients was also advised to reduce red meat, cut out cheese and shellfish, and to increase essential fatty acids.

The practitioner commented: 'At second visit (six weeks from start of prescription) there was 90% improvement. Almost complete remission.

Consultant decided to withhold conventional prescription (not yet given). Continues to do well - is thrilled.'

Table 4 Dietary advice given	
Advice	Number of mentions
reduce meat	22
red meat	16
increase vegetables	22
fruit and vegetables	16
cut coffee	18
cut acid foods	16
shellfish	4
cut tomatoes	6
all solanaceae	6
cut citrus/oranges	11
increase essential fatty acids	11
increase fish, seed, nut oils	6
increase water/fluid	10
cut tea	10
cut dair	9
cut sugar/refined carbohydrates	8
cut alcohol/wine	8
reduce wheat	8
Avoid rhubarb	2

Prescription 2

Urtica
Chamomill
Cimicifuga
Symphytum fol.
Apium

5ml three times a day

This prescription was for a patient with ankylosing spondylitis, a condition that can be hard to treat. The patient had sacroiliac stiffness and pain, relieved by lying down.

The practitioner commented: 'Patient happy. Stopped non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, which aided gastrointestinal problems, and did not need to have steroid injections. Coul move easily.'

Prescription 3

Salix alba
Achillea
Urtica
Harpagophytum
Apium

10ml three times a day

Lastly, a prescription for a patient with a typical arthritis. The symptoms were sharp pain and limited mobility, neck stiffness. An X-ray had confirmed arthritis in the neck. The patient was also advised to increase fruit and vegetables, exclude citrus and acid fruits, reduce wheat and increase other grains.

The practitioner commented: 'Improvement with one week. Large dose could be significant - standard arthritis combination but very successful.'

Dietary advice

A question was included to assess the extent and type of advice being given on diet. All but two of the 57 respondents offered their views on the top three priorities in dietary advice for patients with arthritis. Over half the practitioners provide a diet sheet to such patients. Most commonly patients were advised to reduce their intake of

meat (in particular red meat) and to increase the amount of vegetables they eat. Table 4 shows the advice given.

There were only four mentions of supplements: vitamin C, selenium, zinc and chondroitin.

Conclusion

From the positive comments following all the prescriptions offered, it seems that, alongside dietary recommendations, there is considerable confidence in the herbal treatment of arthritic conditions.