

How To Take Herbal Medicine

• What is herbal medicine?

Herbal medicine, also known as herbalism or phytotherapy, is a medical system based on the use of plants or plant extracts that may be ingested or used topically.

Herbal medicine has been used by many different cultures throughout the world to treat illness and to assist bodily function. It is one of the most traditional and ancient forms of medicine and pre-dates written history by thousands of years.

• Seeing a qualified practitioner

To earn a qualification in herbal medicine practitioners, undergo extensive training in the philosophies, principles and practice of herbal medicine. As well as fundamentals of medical science, including anatomy & physiology, pathophysiology (the underlying cause of diseases), differential diagnosis, pharmacokinetics (what our bodies do to the plants) and pharmacodynamics (what the plants do to our bodies), alongside comprehensive clinical dispensary client prescription.

It is commonly believed that because herbs are natural, they are safe. While this is true for the vast majority of herbs, some plants can harm when used incorrectly. Plus, in this 'chemical age' we live in, herbs can interact not only with pharmaceutical drugs and affect their action in the body, but they can also interact with each other.

By consulting a practitioner qualified in medical herbalism you can be assured you are getting;

- The right herb at the right dose.
- Herbs safe for your condition.
- Herbs that have known adverse interaction with your medications/ supplements.

In addition, herbalism is a holistic health modality, so your practitioner is trained to look at the whole picture and will provide lifestyle and dietary advice to guide you on the path to health and wellness.

• Types of herbal medicines

Herbal medicines for internal use can be prescribed by a qualified herbal practitioner in many forms, such as tablets, capsules, medicinal teas, or as a liquid tonic.

Some of the advantages of a liquid herbal formula or tonic are:

- They can be tailored to meet your individual needs.
- They contain no excipients, tableting agents, etc.
- Liquids are more easily assimilated by the body, therefore producing an optimal and often fast acting effect.

• Tips on taking your herbal tonics

Most importantly, follow the directions supplied by your practitioner. Your practitioner knows your specific case and will provide details on how much and how often to take your herbal tonic, based on your specific requirements.

• Dosage:

In general, your herbal tonic should be taken in divided dose - most herbs need to be taken at least twice daily to ensure the therapeutic components of the herbs maintain their activity in your body around the clock. In some cases, however your practitioner may recommend a single dose at a specific time of day - for example sedative herbs taken just before bed. Always follow the instructions of your practitioner.

• Dilution:

When it comes to herbs, the old adage 'the worse it tastes, the better it is for you' tends to ring true. Most herbal tonics should be taken diluted in water or juice to make them more palatable. Measure the required dosage into a measuring cup & top up with water/juice - in general 20-25ml is sufficient to dilute the herbs. Don't dilute the herbs too much as you will have more unpleasant tasting liquid to swallow. It is best to take the herbs like a 'shot' followed by a 'chaser' of water or juice to remove the taste of the herbs from your mouth.

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• Shake the bottle REALLY well before use

Inadequately shaking the bottle means the active constituents of the herbs may not be consistently dispersed throughout the liquid, so you won't be getting the most benefit from your herbal tonic.

Sedimentation may also happen in the bottle over time if the liquid is not shaken properly before every dose.

• Storage of herbal medicines

Herbal medicines should be stored away from direct sunlight and below 30°C. Sunlight and heat will reduce the shelf life of the herbs and deteriorate active constituents.

• Before or after food?

Your practitioner will advise if your tonic should be taken before or after food. In general, when taken before food herbs will be absorbed into your bloodstream quicker, however in many cases your practitioner will recommend taking the herbs after food to avoid possible irritation of the stomach which may result in nausea.

In some cases, such as with bitter herbs prescribed to improve digestion, it is critical to take these on an empty stomach.

• Safety Guidelines

Always follow the instructions provided by your practitioner.

Only take as directed – do not exceed the prescribed dosage.

A guideline is taking your herbs and supplements at least 1-2 hours from any prescribed medication.

Always advise your practitioner of any medications or supplements you are taking. If you become pregnant or if you notice any significant change in your 'normal' bodily function e.g., a change in frequency of your bowel movements.

Your prescription is individual for you only, not to share.

• Making a Medicinal Herbal Tea

Medicinal herbal teas may be drunk hot or cold, though in most cases they are most beneficial when hot, especially when the herb contains active volatile oils which are released when hot water is poured on them.

• There are two types of herbal teas-

Infusions & Decoctions.

-Infusions are used for soft plant parts e.g., flowers, leaves and herbs.

-Decoctions are used for harder, woody plant parts such as roots and bark.

• Making an Infusion

Use a china or glass teapot & warm by rinsing with a little hot water. Use a heaped teaspoonful of dried herb or herb mixture per cup of hot water. Pour boiled water (just off the boil) over the herbs and cover with a lid. Covering the herbs traps all the important volatile components of the herbs. Leave to steep for 5-10 minutes, strain & drink.

• Making a Decoction

Measure the required amount of dried herb/ herb blend into a saucepan & cover with cold water. Bring to the boil, cover & simmer for 10-15 minutes. Remove from heat, strain and drink.

• Tips on giving kids herbs

The flexibility in dosage and ease in taking liquids make liquid herbal tonics ideal for children – the only potential downside is the taste. To ensure compliance here are a few tips for getting your kids to take their herbs.

Mix with honey or juice – blackcurrant syrup, honey and apple juice is particularly good for disguising the taste of strong or unpleasant herbs. Make into an iceblock or jelly, or frozen berries with a dash of honey or rice syrup for a natural syrup base.