


# Herbal Medicine 101



Embrace The Healing Power of Plants

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Remember, you should consult with a professional before using herbs as medicine. A professional will be able to help you use the right herb, the right way, for the right issue. Herbs are powerful things, and they can interfere with certain medications, always ask your doctor.

## Introduction

The dictionary defines Herbal Medicine as...

*“the study or practice of the medicinal and therapeutic use of plants; herbalism. Remedies and medicines made from plants.”*

Herbal medicine stretches back to a time when science, philosophy, and spirituality were intertwined in a way they no longer are today. In a time that medicine studied plants and their medicinal properties were truly appreciated.

This is the knowledge that we allowed to pass as science moved beyond plants and bio-medicine arrived on the scene. Of course, we should be grateful for the improvements in medicine, but that doesn't mean that herbal medicine should have been left behind.

Before you attempt to embark on using herbal medicine in your own life, you should always carry out research. You should take a look at published work, clinical studies, and trials. Plants are complex, and while there are many herbs that will support your health and protect you from illness, there are also herbs that will negatively impact you.



Certain herbs are safe for ingestion, while others might be more appropriate as a topical application. So, it's vitally important that you have a working knowledge of what is and isn't safe.

Plants have been used to treat illness, injuries and protect wellness long before history was being recorded. Our ancestors used vegetation to eat and cook with, to cover wounds, as poultices, and beyond.

In fact, according to Dr. Ciddi Veeresham, a professor at India's Kakatiya University, around half of the drugs that the FDA has approved over the last 30 years are derived from plants (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3560124/>).

There is still much to be gained *and* learned from herbal medicine. Let's return to nature and we're going to start with the basics.

# About Herbal Medicine

## What Is Herbal Medicine

In Western culture, herbal medicine falls under the umbrella of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM). According to the World Health Organization, about 80% of people all over the world use herbal remedies in their health care routines.

In the United States, herbal medicine products are classified as dietary supplements, as opposed to pharmaceuticals. Herbal supplements are regulated by the FDA (Food and Drug Administration).

## What Is An Herbalist

According to Healthy Communities, herbalists, also sometimes called herbal practitioners and licensed herbalists, are specially trained in the field of herbal medicine. An herbalist uses plants and other natural substances to improve health, promote healing, and prevent and treat illness.

Herbalists use roots, leaves, flowers, berries, bark and other botanicals as medicine.

## What Happens During A Consultation

When you first visit an Herbal practitioner, they should assess a full picture of you and your current health, including but not limited to...

- Full medical history
- Family medical history
- Your diet and lifestyle habits
- Any medications you currently take
- Any treatments you are undergoing

## What Conditions Are Treated With Herbs

The list is too long to add here. Everything from anxiety to insomnia to PMS and in everything between.

## At Home Practice

Since many herbs can interact with certain medications, as well as with some vitamins, minerals and even foods, it is important to consult a specialist or do your due diligence before using herbal medicine at home.

It is also important to get herbal products from a reputable location and source, since not all products are well tested, and many contain ingredients which are not listed on their label. Do your due diligence. Ask your doctor first in all cases.

### Where to get help

- Your doctor
- A qualified herbal therapist
- A certified naturopath
- Pharmacist

## Defining Herbs

According to MedlinePlus, “An herb is a plant or plant part used for its scent, flavor, or therapeutic properties. Herbal medicines are one type of dietary supplement. They are sold as tablets, capsules, powders, teas, extracts, and fresh or dried plants. People use herbal medicines to try to maintain or improve their health.”

It’s fairly simple, but it bears defining simply because so many people confuse herbs with spices. While spices are derived from the seeds, roots, and bark of a tree, herbs are the leaves from a plant. So, if it isn’t considered the leaf, then it isn’t an herb, it’s a spice.



There are plants that contain both herbs *and* spices. Cilantro is an excellent example of this. The seeds are the spice and the leaves are the herb. It really is as simple as that.

Herbs are everywhere. In fact, there’s a good chance you have herbs growing in your yard and you don’t even know it.

**Here is a short list a wide variety of herbs, as well as the many benefits they come with. This list is in no way complete because there are *thousands* of herbs.**

- Aloe – aloe is typically used topically to treat scrapes, cuts, and burns. Of course, it’s probably most famously known for its ability to provide relief from sunburn. It’s also an excellent way to keep your skin supple and smooth. It may also be used to treat acne. You may also be familiar with aloe beverages that improve digestion.
- Rennet – this is known by many names including Indian ginseng, winter cherry, and ashwagandha. It has sedative, analgesic, and anti-inflammatory properties. The leaves are used to make tea, which improves the body’s performance. Moreover, it provides stress relief, as well as providing an immune system boost.  
(<https://www.webmd.com/vitamins/ai/ingredientmono-953/ashwagandha>)
- Mint – most people think of mint as a flavor or even a palate cleanser. Not a lot of people really think about mint in terms of health and wellness. However, you shouldn’t underestimate it because it’s powerful. Not only does mint improve digestion, but it can also soothe an upset stomach. It can be used to relieve headaches, nausea, coughing, and congestion. Additionally, moms can use mint to relieve pain and cracks in their nipples caused by breastfeeding. It doesn’t stop there. Mint is also helpful for acne, burns, memory, fatigue, depression, rheumatism, heartburn, digestion, eye health, muscle aches, and breaking fevers.

- Thyme – thyme features in a lot of recipes because it has a distinct flavor. However, it has health benefits, too. It's great for treating acne, relieving coughs, improving the immune system, and even fighting coughs. Thyme is also excellent at lowering cholesterol and fighting sore throats. It can also serve as a disinfectant.
- Basil – basil is an effective way to keep acne at bay. Boil some fresh leaves and apply the liquid (once cooled) to any breakouts you may have. Additionally, it can help with colds, coughs, indigestion, insect bites, stings, bloating, PMS, and stress.  
(<https://www.webmd.com/vitamins/ai/ingredientmono-303/basil>)
- Alfalfa – this perennial belongs to the legume family and in addition to boosting the immune system, it is also used for high cholesterol, arthritis, and digestive issues. Additionally, it contains chlorophyll, which can help reduce body odor as well as freshen your breath.

- Bearberry – Native American women have long used bearberry to protect unborn children from miscarrying, as well as to help new mothers in the recovery process following childbirth. In Northern Europe, bearberry tea was a



traditional method to treat bladder issues. For headaches? The leaves are smoked – though, this is regulated as it does cause a narcotic effect. Salve is often made to treat minor burns and cuts, as well as gum issues and canker sores. When ingested, the leaves can detox, relieve stomach pain, reduce inflammation, improve the healing process, and boost your immune system.

- Monarda – belonging to the mint family and also known as horsemint or beebalms, this is generally used to create a tea. It can help relieve menstrual pain, nasal congestion, colds, sore throats, fevers, headaches, and digestive problems. It can also be used in ointment form to treat acne, as well as skin conditions such as eczema and psoriasis.
- Bilberry – this leaf helps balance your blood sugar. However, it also contains histamines so if you have allergies it may exacerbate them. In a normal person, though, the histamine can improve the body's healing properties. Additionally, it can



be used to treat GI ulcers. (<https://www.webmd.com/vitamins/ai/ingredientmono-202/bilberry>)

- Common boneset – this is a weed that is found in North America’s temperate regions, including Florida and areas of Canada. It can be used to treat a wide range of conditions including migraines, colds and flu, fevers, and rheumatism. Additionally, it can boost the body’s ability to resist infections. It’s also an effective laxative and may provide relief from other digestive issues.
- Butterbur – it grows in floodplains, wet meadows, and marshes. It brags large leaves, large enough to cover an adult’s head to protect against the elements. Of course, it’s size should be no surprise considering it’s related, though distantly, to the sunflower. The leaves have many uses, including treating asthma, coughs, and Gi issues. It can also be used to treat skin problems and minor wounds. It is an anti-inflammatory, pain relieving, diuretic. (<https://www.webmd.com/vitamins/ai/ingredientmono-649/butterbur>)
- Coriander – you’ll know it as Chinese parsley or cilantro, but the plant is coriander. It has so many benefits, including fighting colon cancer, relieving inflammation, and balancing blood sugar. Additionally, it can help prevent UTIs and improve sleep patterns. Perhaps more importantly, it can help fight anxiety. It can also help protect your body from food poisoning.
- Dandelion – sadly, many people look on dandelions as weeds, but it has a plethora of benefits. Not only does it boost joint and bone health, but it also improves the urinary tract, protects the liver, purifies the blood, fights dementia, settles the stomach, and can prevent gallstones. Beyond that, it can promote weight loss, improve the health of skin and vision, generate the production of red blood cells, and even regular blood pressure and heart rate. It can also treat sore muscles and be used as a laxative. (<https://www.webmd.com/vitamins/ai/ingredientmono-706/dandelion>)
- Dill Weed – another herb painted as a weed, this time thanks to its name. Despite that, it is an herb and it has its own benefits. You can use dill weed as a bug repellent, and with this, you don’t need to worry about harsh chemicals. Dill weed can also fight free radicals, relieve menstrual cramps, improve digestion, reduce cholesterol, improve insomnia, and boost your energy levels. Moreover, it can be used to reduce excess gas and hiccups, to fight and prevent fungal infections, and even to treat head lice.
- Catnip – it *isn’t* just for cats, but don’t worry it won’t send you climbing trees. Humans taking advantage of catnip leaves for health reasons can be traced back to the early 1700s. It can be used to treat insomnia, anxiety disorders, indigestion, cramps, colds,

diarrhea, bug bites, and colic. Additionally, it can be used as a sedative, and it can increase appetite. (<https://www.webmd.com/vitamins/ai/ingredientmono-831/catnip>)

- Fennel – this perennial belongs to the carrot family and it is a natural way to keep your skin tight and firm, thanks to its ability to promote collagen production. So, fennel fights aging, and can also relieve menstrual cramps, obesity, colic, and osteoporosis. Additionally, it can increase appetite, reduce the risk of heart disease and lower blood pressure, improve eye health, aid in digestion, and even improve brain function.
- Holy Basil – not to be confused with basil, holy basil is a different herb, though a distant relation of basil itself. Basil is somewhat sweet, but holy basil is known to have a more peppery flavor. Holy basil can treat migraines, relieve coughs, cure the cold, fight aging, and treat respiratory issues. It has benefits for oral hygiene, too. Not only can it improve your breath, but it can also reduce plaque and tartar and prevent cavities. (<https://www.webmd.com/vitamins/ai/ingredientmono-1101/holy-basil>)
- Lavender – it's probably most famous for its soothing scent. However, there is more to lavender than that. It is as beneficial to your health as it is beautiful. Yes, it is soothing, it can help relieve anxiety, stress, and balance moods. It is also effective in repairing sleep problems. Beyond that, it is an anti-inflammatory that can ease your aches and pains. It is also useful in treating a variety of skin conditions like acne, psoriasis, and eczema.
- Oregano – it's not just for marinara sauce, it has serious health benefits. Oregano will help your body defend against bacteria, fight free radicals and oxidative stress, reduce inflammation, boost your metabolism, and improve digestion. It also supports bone health and healthy cholesterol levels. Beyond that, you can use oregano to treat insect bites, minor wounds, arthritis, sleep issues, UTIs, coughs, and colds. (<https://www.webmd.com/vitamins/ai/ingredientmono-644/oregano>)
- Rosemary – rosemary is another popular seasoning, and it's incredibly easy to grow. However, it has its own health benefits to brag about. It improves your memory, improves focus and concentration, and is also an effective stress reliever. The benefits don't stop there, it can also be used to treat gout, improve blood pressure, relieve pain and toothaches, improve skin issues like eczema, and improve the immune system. It's also a natural breath booster.
- Milk Thistle – this is all about the health of your liver. While it does offer other benefits, the greatest is its ability to protect the liver. Additionally, it can help balance blood sugar, improve brain health, protect your heart, reverse skin damage and conditions, and supports the health of kidneys and the gallbladder. (<https://www.webmd.com/vitamins/ai/ingredientmono-138/milk-thistle>)

- Parsley – most people pick up the parsley garnish on their plate and make a joke about how everyone hates the parsley garnish on plates. Honestly? It's more than just a garnish. It can protect the health of your bones, boost your immune system, fight free radicals, improve kidney function, relieve pain, and improve digestion. Of course, if you pop that garnish in your mouth once you finish that meal, it will improve your breath. So, no, that garnish is not for nothing.
- Sage – sage is helpful to relieve heartburn and indigestion, it can also improve digestive issues like bloating and flatulence. Women can use sage for menstrual relief, and it can also correct milk flow issues for breastfeeding mothers, as well as relieve hot flashes in women going through menopause. Beyond that, it can fight dementia and boost your brain health. (<https://www.webmd.com/vitamins/ai/ingredientmono-504/sage>)
- Common Nettle – this herb requires careful handling as it can irritate your skin, which is why it's also referred to as stinging nettle. Once you get past that, there is a lot to enjoy.

It's a detoxifying agent, but it also increases energy and relieves fatigue, improves healing time, and stimulates the production of red blood cells. Nettle can also break down kidney and gallstones, as well treat asthma, reduce blood pressure, relieve menstrual cramps, and even reduce the pain of giving birth.

## Using Herbs As Medicine

Herbal medicine may seem overly complicated, yet accessible. It's true because just about anyone can grow herbs or purchase them. The confusion comes in when enthusiasts want to make their own medicine but lack the understanding of how to do so. Admittedly, that's what



generally puts enthusiasts off attempting to make their own herbal medicines.

If you educate yourself, you can create your own herbal medicines to help treat everyday issues like anxiety, fatigue, digestive problems, and even a low immune system. If you want to get into herbal medicine, then we have some additional information that should help you get started.

There are a variety of different solutions that you can make using herbs. You may prefer teas or tinctures, balms or salve, decoctions or perhaps even bitters.

### Tinctures

tinctures aren't as difficult as they may sound. It's similar to tea, with the main difference being that alcohol is used to extract the health benefits from the plant. The alcohol is also then used to preserve its medicinal value.

This is something that you can do in your kitchen, much like people can jar jam or can vegetables. You may enjoy making your own chamomile tea during the season and recognize that there's too much for you to get through.

You can use a mason jar, chamomile flowers, and add alcohol (40% vodka will do the trick) so that it's around two inches above your chosen herb. You should fill the jar about halfway with herbs. If you're using dried herbs you may need to add more alcohol at a later date. You should label the jar with the date, the herbs you used, and the ABV.

Make sure you give the jar a shake twice a day, every day, for a period of one month. Once the month is up you can use a cheesecloth to strain. Then, during the off-season, you can still enjoy the health benefits of your favorite herbs. Tinctures are powerful so, you should only enjoy a few drops at a time.

## Teas

when it comes to tea, it's the same as above except you are using hot water and enjoying the beverage right away.

- Maceration – generally, oils are used to extract the medicinal benefits from the plant. You can allow them to infuse for a month or even just a couple of hours. Ideally, you should use fresh herbs and chop them into small pieces. Then place them in a small jar with oil. These are powerful remedies so you should only be taking them in small amounts.

## Decoction

for every cup of cold water, you plan to use, you should use around a tablespoon of your chosen herb. The water and the herbs should be tossed into a pot and brought to a gentle boil. Once it starts to boil you can turn it down to simmer, place a lid on the pot and leave for around half an hour.

Strain the herbs and it's ready to enjoy. You should use the liquid within 48 hours of making it. You may be able to use the herbs to create another decoction. it's also possible to use a decoction to create a syrup for cold and flu season.

## Bitters

to make your own herbal bitters, you will need a mason jar as well as dropper bottles (amber is preferable as this will protect the ingredients). You will also need a cup of a white spirit, such as vodka, gin or rum.

There are plenty of recipes available online. However, for the purposes of this description, we will describe what you will need to make a digestive bitter. You will need to peel an orange, two tablespoons of dandelion leaves, eight cardamom pods, as well as three sage leaves. The dry ingredients should be placed in the mason jar first, once you have done that you can pour in your alcohol.

Place the lids on it securely and shake vigorously. You should shake it once a day for around three weeks or so. You can then strain the alcohol using cheesecloth before transferring your liquid into the smaller amber dropper bottles.

You can enjoy your remedy around 15 minutes before you plan to eat – half a dropper on your tongue should be more than sufficient.

## Final Thoughts

**Remember, you should consult with a professional before using herbs as medicine.** A professional will be able to help you use the right herb, the right way, for the right issue. Herbs are powerful things, and they can interfere with certain medications, always ask your doctor.

It's particularly important for anyone who may have an existing condition, be pregnant, breastfeeding or taking medications for high blood pressure or blood thinners. If you are unsure, it's always best to consult a professional.

You can get started by growing your own herbs, whether it's in the yard or on your windowsill. If you're looking for an easy place to start, then perhaps the formula for digestive bitters is where you should begin.

When you use these bitters before eating it will improve your digestive function. Another easy place to start is with mint to make your own tea. Mint is easy to grow and it's equally simple to make your own tea. It's always wise to start off simple as you will experience a boost in confidence when you succeed in the early stages.

You don't want to attempt anything too ambitious, lest you scare yourself off entirely. So, start off with your tea and bitters and then you can branch out to tinctures, a maceration or decoctions.

Of course, if you want to get started right away, you will need to go purchase herbs from the store. You can start getting a bit of practice into creating your own herbal remedies, so you don't have to wait for them to grow.

Additionally, it's important to always label your herbal medicines. You might think you'll remember what ingredients you've used, but it's always best to note a full list of ingredients, as well as the date that you made it. It's wise to follow best practice in these types of situations as it's your health that we are talking about.