

Herbs In Practice

Adapted from *Herbal Defense*, Robyn Landis and Karta Purkh Singh Khalsa
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FORMS AND PREPARATIONS

There are a number of forms in which herbs can be used, and several common ways to prepare them. There is no one best way—the “ideal” form and preparation varies from herb to herb, as well as from person to person.

Some herbs are almost equally effective and beneficial in a variety of forms; others have one definite best preparation, with others that are adequate but not nearly as good. Still others may have one and only one way they can be effectively used.

“Best” is usually defined as the way to get the most active ingredient out of the herb. However, in some cases the “best” preparation or form may be the only way to safely use the herb. For example, stinging nettles are only used dried, so that they no longer sting. And only specialized processing preserves their antihistamine-like compound. Cascara bark must be dried and aged so that its effects (laxative) are mellowed—when fresh these effects are more harsh than anyone would wish to experience. Thus some herbs must be processed in some way, while still others are more effective when less processing is applied.

Some active ingredients are more soluble in alcohol than water, and these herbs are best taken as a tincture. Some herbs are more soluble in water, milk, or oil. Some are not soluble in liquid at all and must be dried and powdered.

“Best” may also be defined as how the individual is realistically able to consume it. If the “best” way to obtain the active ingredients of a particular herb is dried and powdered in a capsule, but your child cannot swallow a capsule, then this is *not* the best way for *her* to take the herb. For her a liquid could be better—because taking it is better than not taking it at all, and the difference in effectiveness between capsules and a liquid form may be marginal.

Another consideration in determining “best” form is whether the herb is weak and mild, or very strong and potent. Herbs that are mild are best brewed as tea, not only because their mildness makes them inherently drinkable, but also because you’d have to put so much of a mild herb into capsules that you would be faced with a possibly prohibitive number of pills to swallow. With such herbs, it may be easier to drink a lot of liquid, and you can brew it strong to reduce the amount of total liquid consumed.

On the other hand, very strong herbs may not only be too bitter, astringent or just plain awful-tasting to consume as tea, and if an herb is so strong that only a few capsules will do the trick, why go to the trouble of making tea?

Fresh vs. broken down

Most herbs are processed in some way before we consume them; it’s rare that we walk out to our gardens, snip a leaf off of a medicinal herb and chomp it down. Instead, that leaf (or the root or rhizome or flower) may be dried, brewed into a tea, ground and put in capsules, or soaked in alcohol or glycerin and made into a tincture.

People often ask, “But doesn’t processing, or cooking, a food or herb reduce its potency?” They want to know if it’s worth eating at all if it’s processed or cooked. Some purists might say it isn’t. We are big believers in moderation and practicality, however. We encourage people to do what they *can* do, which is almost always better than nothing at all.

The ideal in most (though not all) cases would be to use the herb fresh and whole. If you ingest a fresh herb whole, you are assured of getting 100% of the active ingredients at its fullest strength. However, for many reasons that ideal can be unattainable. It often simply isn’t practical or possible to consume an herb totally unprocessed.

First, processing provides convenience. Most of us don’t have time to wildcraft or go out and gather all (or even some) of our own herbs. Second, fresh herbs don’t last—usually some kind of processing is necessary to preserve an herb if you plan to keep it for more than a few days. Third, if you relied only on fresh harvests, there would be times during the year when the herbs you need were not growing.

Fourth, some herbs are not as safe or effective when fresh (though these are a small minority), such as stinging nettles and cascara bark as mentioned above. Raw garlic also upsets some peoples’ stomachs; if so, cooked or even dried garlic is going to be better than none at all. (If anything makes you feel really bad or uncomfortable, you should discontinue it.)

Fifth, processing sometimes allows for more acceptable taste. If drying, powdering and capsuling a valuable herb makes it consumable, whereas its acrid odor might preclude its use any other way, then there is value in that processing *because the herb gets used*.

In most cases it’s true that *some* active ingredient or nutrient value is lost to some degree each time an herb or food is processed or cooked. Powdering and drying causes some active constituents to be lost, or to lose some potency. Simmering a tea lets some volatile principles evaporate away. Brewing a tea doesn’t necessarily release all of the constituents of the herb into the water. Making a tincture doesn’t assure that all of the constituents are released into the alcohol or other base.

But even though all of that is true, herbs produce results even in an imperfect world. We clearly get value from what we are able to get out of them. We know that most herbs are consumed in these ways, and most herbs used in successful research experiments were processed in one of these ways. So whatever sacrifices in quality or potency we accept do not seem ultimately to compromise effectiveness overall.

Going for perfection and then achieving nothing because it made life impossible and you gave up is the most ineffective way to use herbs. To dismiss processing, which might reduce effectiveness by some unmeasurable but probably marginal degree, would be to eliminate the use of many herbs. In fact, sometimes, lightly cooking may even enhance the active ingredients or change chemical reactions. For example, some studies have shown that lightly cooking vegetables enhances the absorbability of carotenes. Some compounds in garlic may be intensified or even newly created by light cooking.

Medicinal tea

Teas are the most popular way to take herbs in most other cultures of the world, but the least popular in the U.S. In the traditional cultures which were the origins of holistic natural medicine, teas (and broths and soups) are a birth-to-death part of everyone’s lifestyle.

Even in our own culture today, tea is the form of choice if the herbs are mild; it is also usually the least expensive. Some advantages of tea use: the entire herb is usually used; no binders, additives or alcohol are involved; it’s usually inexpensive, easily swallowed and convenient for high doses. Disadvantages: it can be time-consuming, inconvenient to prepare, bad-tasting and require high intake volume. Tea also spoils more quickly than capsules or tincture and doesn’t travel well or conveniently.

There are many ways to make an herbal tea or broth. The two most common are infusions and decoctions. In an infusion you steep the herb in water that’s been boiled; in a decoction you simmer/boil the herb itself.

Infusions are best for delicate flowers, soft leaves, berries, and herbs with strong odors or volatile oils. Example would be nettle leaves, passionflower, or coltsfoot. To make an infusion, pour boiled water over herbs in a container and seal the container tightly (this will prevent volatile oils from escaping). Keep in a warm place and steep for a minimum of 30-60 minutes (or for a maximum of 12 hours). The active ingredient in most herbs comes out in the first hour of steeping.

Decoctions are best for sturdy, coarse, tough herbs that need to be broken down—roots, barks, tougher leaves and stems. Examples include astragalus, dong quai, or willow bark. Herbs with volatile oils are usually not decocted because the volatile oils are dissipated by evaporation. To make a decoction, place the herbs directly in a pot of water and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to simmer, and simmer covered for 30 to 60 minutes. Expect water to decrease by half. For either tea preparation, squeeze every bit of tea out of the herb before use.

For either an infusion or a decoction, a standard rule of thumb for quantity is one ounce of herb (by weight) to every pint of water. For convenience, you can make either infusions or decoctions in large “batches” and store them for up to a week in the fridge. They can be drunk cold straight out of the fridge although for certain illnesses a warm (reheated, if necessary) tea is beneficial, such as to reduce chills or induce sweating. Keep the tea in a tightly sealed container, preferably glass.

For some herbs, cold water, milk or other substances are actually more effective at drawing out the active ingredient than hot water. With some teas, the active ingredient is not soluble in water. It takes more sophistication to understand these nuances as you get further and further into herbal medicine. A trained herbalist can educate you about the more intricate distinctions involved in preparing the herbs you use. However, if you are not aware of these subtleties you will still get value out of the herbs you take; this simply goes back to the issue of ideals vs. realities.

Two excellent tools for making tea are the plunger-style “French press” normally used for coffee (large ones can be purchased as cheaply as \$20), and an Asian herb cooker (also called a tea cooker) which can be purchased at most large Asian groceries for \$60 to \$80. The French press is good for infusions (pouring boiled water over the herbs and steeping, then pressing). The herb cooker keeps the herb at the right temperature for the right amount of time.

Teas that are brewed very strong, especially decoctions made with one ounce herb to one pint water, when squeezed out should yield about 1-1/2 cups of strong medicine tea, a typical daily dose. This can be taken by the tablespoon (2 to 4 per half-hour or hour). This is especially useful for children.

Teas suitable to be brewed mildly (beverage strength) can be taken in doses as high as 4 to 8 cups a day for adults, depending on the condition.

Dried/Encapsulated

This is the most popular and successful way to take herbs in North America.

There are many advantages: Drying/grinding preserves fresh herbs that otherwise would die; the process also reduces volume and concentrates the herb. The properties of some herbs are actually enhanced by drying. Other benefits include the use of the entire herb, convenience, absence of taste, long shelf-life and easy dosing.

On the downside, capsules are also more expensive, slower-acting, sometimes hard to swallow and/or digest.

Pills are an American medicine phenomenon. Other cultures do not use pills and capsules the way we do. Herbal medicines are typically taken as powders (in Ayurveda), teas and soups (in China) or tinctures (in Europe). The most economical size capsules will be "00."

Syrup

Syrups are mainly used by children. They are especially good for coughs and sore throats, since they are soothing and bring the herb in contact with the affected area. There are a few commercially made herbal syrups, but not nearly as many as there were at the turn of the century when natural healing was the forefront of medicine. Syrups can be made at home by adding honey or glycerine to a tea. You may boil a quart of water with two ounces of herb down to a pint, then add one or two ounces of honey or glycerine.

Tinctures

Tinctures are less expensive than capsules, yet still travel well. They are fast acting, easily swallowed and digested, and never lose potency. However, they may taste bad, often contain alcohol, all of the active ingredient may not be extracted and the whole herb is not used. The necessary dose may also be more than you want to swallow.

The majority of commercial tinctures are made with alcohol as the carrier substance. Alcohol is a good preservative and in the case of most herbs is excellent at extracting active components. The herb is soaked in a solution of alcohol and water for a period of time.

Other carrier solutions may be used for tinctures. In some cases, alcohol is not the best medium for the herb's active constituents. Also, although the actual total amount of alcohol consumed when using an herbal tincture is extremely small, some people still prefer to avoid it completely; in the case of children, especially.

After alcohol, the next most common and valuable base solution for tinctures is glycerine. This clear liquid with the consistency of syrup is extremely useful for children, where its application as a tincture medium is most common. It has excellent preservative properties rivaling those of alcohol and also does a good job of extracting many herbs' natural ingredients, although many herbalists feel this is not true in all cases and that alcohol remains superior overall. It has an advantage over alcohol for extracting volatile oils, but is less effective for others, such as gums and resins.

Glycerine is also naturally sweet, and this is another feature that makes it excellent for children's tinctures, since it can help to conceal the taste of bitter herbs. It is completely nontoxic, and may have detoxifying properties of its very own. Also, since it is a natural byproduct of fat breakdown, and not a sugar, it does not raise blood sugar despite its sweetness.

Tinctures are a widely-misunderstood form of herbal medicine among American consumers. There is a widespread misconception (fostered largely by the dosages printed on the labels) that three drops of a tincture in some orange juice will make you all better. These dosages, along with the one-ounce dropper bottles in which these tinctures are most often sold, are a real problem.

Tinctures are *not* so super-strong that a mere several drops will work wonders. They are no stronger than any other form of herbal medicine. Like most other herbs in any form, the dose needs to be high enough to be therapeutic. "Maximum 1-10 drops" is just the manufacturer's way of being careful and conservative. It also reflects the company's anticipation of *your* expectations; it may be assumed that you simply *won't* take any more than a few drops.

Unfortunately, like all misinformation about herbs, this creates problems. It doesn't educate people about how herbs really can be effective, which could engender more comfort with the doses that *really* work. It doesn't foster more respect for herbs because when inadequate doses predictably don't work, it reinforces the ideas that herbs are "weak"

or ineffectual medicine. When someone takes three drops of echinacea/goldenseal tincture and their infection doesn't vanish, they may write off herbs forever.

The realistic dosage for most tinctures is half an ounce per day for adults. In that case, the way tinctures are commonly sold, in one-ounce dropper bottles, is absurd—each bottle represents a two-day supply. In the more herbally sophisticated countries of Europe, tinctures are a common form of herbal medicine and are sold in more sensible pints and quarts, so that appropriate dosages—by the teaspoon or tablespoon—are economical. Tinctures could be a fraction of their current prices if they were sold in logical quantities.

At any rate, buy tinctures in the largest size you can find them and forget the eyedropper—use a teaspoon.

Teabags With Names

Your health food store and even grocery store shelves are filled with boxes of teabags with fanciful names, some of which claim to be medicinal. Unfortunately, they're not, although many of these may make very pleasant beverages.

These teas are the company's way to introduce you to the herb world in a palatable way. But they are beverages, not medicines. They are probably about nine-tenths flavoring and one-tenth active ingredient. They generally contain about one-fourteenth of an ounce of herb, whereas medicinal teas generally require an ounce of tea to a cup of water. And you pay for the teabag. Obviously they are not an economical way to get your herbs.

It's fine to drink a beverage with a bit of herbal medicine in it, but don't expect therapeutic results or you will be disappointed in "herbs" without ever knowing what they can really do when taken in proper medicinal doses.

DOSAGE ISSUES

Adequate dose is essential

Dosages are a problem with herbal medicine, but not in the way many people think. While in rare cases people have taken too much of an herb that should only be taken in small quantities, the prevailing problem in herbal medicine is people not taking enough. This greatly undermines the effectiveness of herbal treatment.

The problem is that we're so trained to think in terms of pharmaceutical doses (as well as in terms of instant results) that we apply this thinking to herbs. Generally, it doesn't work, and this in turn wrongly colors perceptions of herbal effectiveness. You cannot take one herb capsule and expect the same kind of results as one drug capsule.

Of course, it is crucial to be able to distinguish those few herbs whose normal doses should be limited because of their natural potency. This brings us back to the importance of education—among health professionals as well as the lay public.

When we say capsules, we always mean size "00" gelatin capsules. Size 0 contain about half as much herb material. Size 0 may be appropriate for children. For adults, the 00 size is more practical for getting more herb material. These can be purchased as "empties" and filled with bulk herb purchased from an herb pharmacy. When you buy bottles of pre-encapsulated herb, it is often not possible to control whether you get 00 or 0 size capsules.

Take with food

Herbs, especially capsules, are best taken with food. Taking herbs with food vastly reduces the risk of queasiness or other digestive discomfort, especially when increasing dosages. Encapsulated herbs filled with light material have a tendency to "float" (the sensation that they have not traveled all the way to the stomach, but are rising back up the esophagus). Chasing the capsules with some food as well as plenty of water is helpful. Warmer liquids are generally better than cold ones for swallowing capsules.

Divide your doses

You greatly reduce the risk of discomfort by dividing your herb doses throughout the day. You may want to take herbs with two or three different meals. In addition to being more comfortable, this ensures a more steady and even supply of the active ingredient throughout the day.

Increase Gradually

With any herbal medicine it's prudent to start with a lower dosage and increase the dosage as necessary to achieve the desired result. When you reach the desired effect, continue and sustain that dosage for as long as

necessary. If you reach a point of discomfort (most commonly, in the form of queasiness, gas or other digestive distress) reduce the dose and sustain it when you reach a comfortable level.

Give it time

The time frame for improvement with herbal medicine depends a great deal on the condition being treated, the herbs being used, and the relative health of the individual. Clearly, a person with a cold can expect different results than a person with chronic fatigue syndrome. A simply vaginal yeast infection will clear up more quickly than systemic candida; a skin fungus may disappear faster than a hormonal imbalance.

In addition, person who eats a healthy diet, exercises, and abstains from harmful substances will metabolize herbs more quickly and efficiently, and generally be better equipped to put the “tools” to good use, than one who eats poorly and abuses drugs, alcohol and cigarettes.

Because these factors are so variable, it is very difficult to define an adequate time trial for herbal treatment. We can, however, offer a few general guides.

For an acute condition, you should see improvements within one week and resolution within two weeks. For chronic illness and disease patterns, especially long-established ones, it can take three to six months to see improvements and one to two years to reverse damage. One rule of thumb, according to some authorities, is one month of healing for every year you have had a condition, illness or other health problem.

Fortunately, in such cases, symptoms can usually be relieved long before the actual source of the disease is healed. Symptoms can generally be dealt with almost immediately (within days) while the underlying causes of the symptoms may take months, or in tough cases even years, to respond fully. Thus, the irritating symptoms of sinus allergies might be in check by tomorrow, but the allergies might not be eliminated until next year.

You can generally be more aggressive with herbal treatment in an acute situation, since treatment will be short-term and the condition should be self-limiting. For longer-standing conditions requiring long-term treatment, truly aggressive treatment is difficult to maintain (though for very serious illness, sometimes necessary). Sometime milder, gentler herbal protocols that are “livable” on a long-term basis are required—along with a liberal dose of patience—for indefinitely sustained treatments.

STORING HERBS

You can minimize the quality of any herb by exposure to heat, light and air.

Like fruit juice or milk, prepared herb teas are perishable. They must be used within three to seven days, and that’s refrigerated. Signs that a tea has “gone bad” include it being sour, bubbly, fermented or, of course, fuzzy.

Room temperature is fine for dried herbs, and plastic bag with a twistie tie is recommended to keep it airtight. You may want to put the plastic bag inside a paper bag to avoid light exposure. Glass jars with rubber sealed lids are excellent for storing bulk herbs. Dark (amber) jars are better. (You’ll note that most tinctures come in amber or brown bottles. Tinctures generally last forever.)

BUYING HERBS

Where you buy your herbs definitely matters. All herbs sources are not equal; quality and reliability can vary greatly. Because the herb marketplace is still relatively unregulated and without uniform standards, it is very important to find suppliers you can trust and whose quality is consistent and dependable. Excellent suppliers and sources are out there—you just have to know what you’re looking for.

When and how herbs are harvested, how long they spend in transit, how well-preserved they are and how regular the turnover is all affect how effective your herbs are once you get them. A responsible, knowledgeable and stable supplier can be counted on to buy and carry properly handled and high-grade products.

Fresh bulk herbs

Dried, cut, powdered—bulk herbs become the teas you drink and, if you make them yourself, the capsules you take. The best place to buy most bulk herbs is an herb pharmacy.

Herb pharmacies are like the apothecaries that were everywhere at the turn of the century, since they *were* the pharmacies, which dispensed an enormous range of herbal medicines in every possible form. As drug pharmacies became the standard, the herb pharmacy disappeared. Now, herb pharmacies are making a bit of a comeback, although they are still, unfortunately, quite rare. Even Colorado, a hotbed of natural healing, has only one in the entire state. Seattle is extremely progressive, with two. San Francisco and L.A. each have several.

Herb pharmacies make a much higher grade of herb available to the consumer. Herbs are graded after harvesting, and the top 15 percent goes to professional herbalists. The bottom 85 percent goes to health food store market, and the quality is mediocre. This doesn’t mean that health food store herbs will hurt you; they just may not help you as much or as quickly, because the potency may not be as high. This may mean taking more to get the same effect, which is more costly in the long run. In the short run, herbs from an herb pharmacy will cost you a little more. But for a 20 to 30 percent higher price, you may get up to ten times the active ingredient in an herb by buying it from an herb pharmacy.

Another advantage of herb pharmacies is that they are generally run, owned and staffed by professional herbalists. They are better able to educate you and answer your questions. These shops generally sell only herbs, so you know they are specialists and that all of their attention is focused on the herbs. In a health food store, herbs are usually a very tiny portion of the products they sell and the revenue they make, and they get lost in the shuffle. Very rarely is someone at a health food store really knowledgeable about the bulk herbs they’re selling.

Supplement capsules and pills

Packaged herbal supplements can be purchased at an herb pharmacy as well. Sometimes herb pharmacies encapsulated and package their own “house brand” of many popular herbs. These are usually of better quality than mass-marketed commercial brands. If not buying packaged supplements at an herb pharmacy, seek well-known, reputable brands.

Tinctures

Tinctures are another herb preparation you can purchase pre-packaged in herb pharmacies and health food stores. Again, herb pharmacies may sell their own “house brand” which are made at the store with fresh high-quality herbs. They may also sell popular brands, as will health food stores and some co-ops and grocery stores which emphasize natural foods.

Beware the wannabe herbalist

When you go to an herb pharmacy or health food store, the job of the counter-people there is to sell you something and get your money. Your job is to get what you are there for and get out of there. The clerks generally cannot give you an intelligent response to what ails you. We apologize to those who actually can—they do exist—but our general experience has been that when a health food store clerk latches on to what ails you or what you are looking for, s/he will take you on a tour of the store and find you many products to meet your “needs” other than (or in addition to) the ones you came in for.

This is less of a problem at herb pharmacies than health food stores, but even there, the professional herbalist(s) who own and manage the store may not staff the cash register. You should not be obtaining health advice from a cashier. Herb pharmacists can help educate you, but there is a fine line between customer education and “prescribing.”

The fact is that no one, even if they are very knowledgeable and qualified when it comes to herbs, can make an appropriate diagnosis in two minutes of talking to you.

It is *never* a good idea to go into a health food store or even an herb pharmacy and say “What do you have for [xyz condition]?” You should determine what herbs are best for you with the help of a qualified herbalist or other natural health practitioner, or through your own thorough and intensive study. Know what you are looking for and don’t be swayed by the recommendations of clerks, unless you know them well and trust their judgment.

Costs

Herb costs can vary as widely as quality. Unfortunately, cost is not necessarily a harbinger of quality, either. It’s crucial, again, to know and trust your sources to ensure that you not only get what you pay for, but that you pay a fair and decent price.

As we discussed above, herb pharmacies are generally 20 to 30 percent more expensive for bulk herbs and other items as health food stores, but in exchange, the quality increase can be many times that. Still, herb pharmacies are not necessarily the most cost-effective sources for absolutely everything. Herbs that have become very popular to the point of being trendy will be extremely expensive even at an herb pharmacy.

We wish that we could offer you a simple, foolproof strategy for costing out your herbs that would work across the board for all products and all suppliers. But we can't, because herb costs and price-to-quality ratios vary so much locally, and even in a single locale from store to store and product to product. What is necessary for every herb consumer to do is, through research and some trial and error, develop a personal strategy for obtaining your herbs at the best possible prices.

A qualified local herbalist can be a huge help in this process, directing you to the best sources for the best herbs both for price and quality. Herbalists know the ins and outs of the herb trade, are usually familiar with the products and prices of most local retailers, and may have inside information about your local market.

GENERIC, ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL SUPPLEMENT FORMULAS

There is a huge distinction between the kind of authentic herbal healing that qualified herbalists practice, and the sort of one-size-fits-all, often multilevel-marketed herbal blends that are unfortunately the only way herbs get out to much of the public.

By generic we don't mean "no-name" brands. On the contrary, the kind of supplements we are referring to may have very fancy names, often used to suggest high-tech-ness in general or specific benefits. By "generic" we mean *not specifically targeted at a particular need, type of person, or condition*.

Lack of specificity and personalization

For example, we would rather see you look at the myriad specific issues (preferably with the help of a trained and qualified practitioner) that may be factors in a health condition, and address them with the appropriate herbs, than take a one-size-fits-all "Herbal Cleanse and Detox" formula or "Herbal Yeast Syndrome" remedy.

When you choose single herbs for specific conditions, you can control how much of each herb you take, in what form and what concentrations, and in what ratios (if you take more than one). You can also control the source and the quality to a much greater degree.

Another major problem with these products is that you are using them without any information about what *you* need. This is best obtained from an herbal practitioner or educator who can help you learn to identify strengths and weaknesses using the body typing systems of natural healing, and educate you about the best herbs and other natural products to enhance your health and heal troubling conditions. Lifestyle, health history, special sensitivities and other considerations will narrow the field of best effective herbs for you considerably.

One-size-fits-all formulas may contain herbs you don't need and exclude the ones you do. You can buy a formula with eight or ten herbs in it that are not related to anything you are necessarily trying to accomplish. At worst you can waste a lot of money and get discouraged. The predictable lack of results can water down any faith in the power of herbal medicine, which can be seen clearly when you have a specific issue and take herbs tailored for the issue.

There's nothing wrong with formulas per se. Formulas, in fact, are how the majority of herbs are used in traditional medicine of other cultures. But the formulas used in these cultures are either classical formulas that have a long history of use for specific purposes, or developed just for the individual by the herbal practitioner. Many formulas sold here are simply the 10 or 12 trendiest herbs with which American consumers are familiar, stuffed into one capsule.

Cost

The unfocused, generic formulas usually cost a lot more than single herbs which you might target to specific conditions. With these types of commercial products you can spend a lot of money and get very little in return.

Tips for avoiding the "generic" traps

- Seek specialists. Don't get your herbs from mass market catalogs. Get them from a qualified herb pharmacy or trusted mail-order company that specializes only in herbs.
- Be cautious about herb formulas sold by network marketed (multilevel marketing) companies.

- Stick to single-herb products as much as possible. If they are intelligently put together or recommended by someone who knows what they're doing—an herbalist, naturopath, etc.—blended formulas are fine, but the everything-but-the-kitchen-sink combinations designed solely to sell, not combined for any therapeutic or synergistic purpose, should be avoided.
- Avoid herbs with cheesy ads. This may sound very subjective, but the more tacky and un-classy the packaging and promo, the more likely the stuff is untrustworthy.
- Don't buy herbs from anyone that promises instant results. These are the herbal world's "quick-weight-loss" counterparts
- Don't buy the cheapest herb on the market. This is not to say that you can't find economical herbs and supplements, but exercise common sense.
- Know what you are trying to accomplish. Learn about herbs overall and the best herbs for what your goals are. Know the basics of the energetics and tastes of herbs as defined by Eastern herbal medicine.
- Seek professional support. The absolute best way to get results from herbs is to have them tailor-matched to your body type and condition by someone who is experienced with one of the traditional Asian healing systems or uses kinesiology or acupressure to assess which herbs are most appropriate for you at the time.

CHOOSING AN HERBALIST or NATURAL HEALTH PRACTITIONER

We have presented many reasons for this field's undeserved status as a target of skepticism and persecution, and offered many reasons why these attitudes are unwarranted and you should let down your guard. Now we must suggest something that seems to run counter to that bid: that you must be cautious about choosing an herbalist

Here are some tips for finding a qualified herbalist in the current environment:

- While there is currently no accreditation for herbal healing, the American Herbalist Guild is an association that any herbalist you consult should belong to. Professional members are admitted by peer review and must pass an exam and meet a minimum of clinical practice hours.
- Get recommendations from friends and family whose opinions on these kinds of matters you trust. Interview several to see who is the best fit for you.
- Go to classes given by herbalists to get a sense of whether their approach and special areas of knowledge suit your needs.
- Avoid those who pitch one specific brand of product. A good herbalist will have a broad base of knowledge about many different kinds of herbs and will be interested in teaching you how to find the best herbs in the best form or preparation at the best price, for your purposes.

WHEN TO CONSULT A MEDICAL DOCTOR

Herbal medicine, as part of natural holistic healing, can be used as a first resort for many minor and chronic illnesses. We suggest that turning first to natural, "lower-tech," non-invasive and nontoxic remedies can be more effective in the short run, healthier in the long run, safer, and more economical for you personally as well as for the health care system.

However, there absolutely are situations where you should consult a medical doctor. See a doctor when:

- You have been seriously injured and are experiencing shock, severe bleeding, head trauma or other life-threatening condition.
- An infection is not responding at all to natural alternatives.
- You have lumps, masses, sores or lesions anywhere on your body that remain after a few weeks.
- Any condition you have been trying to treat with other methods shows no improvement after several days/weeks.

SHOULD YOU SEEK STANDARDIZED EXTRACTS?

One somewhat disturbing aspect of the drive in research to find out *why* something works is that there is always an underlying presumption that we will want to isolate it and put in a concentrated pill. When we do this with herbs, we end up with what is called a "standardized extract"—a product that contains what is believed to be the active ingredient, standardized so that every unit (pill, capsule, 10 drops of tincture) contains an identical amount of active ingredient at

the identical concentration. In this way, they become a “natural drug.” Herbalist Michael Moore calls standardized products and phytopharmaceuticals “Little Drugs,” and suggests that they not blend into the marketplace as “herbs” because they are *not* herbs, as they lack the diluting, buffering effects as well as the synergies of whole plants.

These extracts are an attempt to exert pharmaceutical quality control over botanical products. In an attempt to create consistency, and, proponents claim, eliminate side effects (a weak argument, because most herbs cause few to none side effects when they are whole, and ironically, isolating constituents is *more* likely to cause side effects because many of the components that belong with it are gone) manufacturers will spend millions to make these extracts using pharmaceutical equipment and procedures—and maintain magic bullet medicine.

Standardized extracts are usually used in scientific studies since they allow researchers to produce quantifiable, repeatable results. In fact, standardized herbal extracts originated in Europe, where most of the research on botanicals has used the extracts.

Not only do isolated and concentrated extracts of bioactive compounds often cause problems that they wouldn't in their milder, balanced form; it's also telling that the drive is always toward finding Americans something they can swallow quickly. Why isolate the compound in green cabbage that seems to prevent ulcers? Because people don't want to eat cabbage or drink cabbage juice. It's the same with so many other foods.

The whole-herb vs. standardized-extract argument is becoming a central theme in the philosophical tensions between holistic healing and conventional science/medicine.

One reason that modern science may be so gung-ho to segregate compounds is simply out of habit—that's what we've always (for the past 70 years) done. Convenience is also an issue, as is patentability and economic potential. Another argument for standardization is related to safety. Many people prefer the standardized extract of an herb because its potency is known, which helps determine dosage. Only when dosages can be standardized, some say, are herbs truly safe.

What you often *do* need for herbs to be safe and effective is everything else in the herb. What you lose when you take herbs apart is the very essence of herbal medicine. Some plants can be reduced to the pharmacology of specific constituents, but not all. A whole herb acts across a wide spectrum of actions from a range of compounds that provide synergies, safeguards, and enhancements to one another. This is considered by herbalists to be the strength of herbal medicine. Most plant substances have up to 10,000 identifiable chemical components, and hundreds or dozens of them may be active in many different ways. You could research for a century and possibly never figure all of it out.

Most herbalists agree that the broad spectrum of constituents in plants work together to produce their effects as the result of a complex synergy between various components that is hard to pin down—and not necessary to identify in order for the whole plant to work.

Thus many herbalists are opposed to the idea of extracting an active ingredient (or several) and engineering them into a more concentrated, faster-acting, (supposedly) effective supplement. Ed Smith, founder and president of Herb Pharm in Williams, Oregon, noted in his article “A Case For Full Herbal Extracts” (Natural Foods Merchandiser, February 1996), “A standardized herbal extract is not superior in quality simply because it contains one (out of hundreds) of the herb's chemical constituents, nor does it have superior healing or health promoting potential because it is ‘stronger.’”

Full herbal extracts vs. standardized extracts

It is important to make a distinction between standardized extracts and full herbal extracts. A full herbal extract (also called a “simple extract” or “crude extract”) contains all or most of the whole herb's chemical components, balanced to the proportions in which those components would appear in the whole herb. It is a way to get everything the whole herb has to offer, only more concentrated and in a convenient form. The standardized extract, on the other hand, contains only one or a few of *what is presumed to be* the herb's “active” ingredients, with supposedly “inert” ingredients removed.

But as many herbalists point out, many active components in whole herbs were at one time believed to be inert, even after research had been conducted. Components of echinacea once believed to be inert are now considered key active constituents. There are herbs whose active ingredients still have not been identified. And herbs consistently show more activity when the whole herb is used than when isolated ingredients are applied.

In general, contraindications for herbs are rare because herbs themselves are so gentle, dilute and for the most part slow-working. Because they are whole plants, made of compounds our bodies have seen since the time of our ancestors, our bodies perceive them as something akin to food. In most cases it's like worrying about contraindications for eating rice and beans together.

No herbalist wishes to produce side effects, nor does s/he expect to. For the most part, herbs should be free of side effects, and most often they are—when used by knowledgeable consumers, or by trained herbalists who typically consider the whole person and their body type, current levels of functioning, and various other individual co-factors.

CONTRAINDICATIONS AND OTHER CONCERNS