

Herbal Medicine - Strengthening A Child's Resistance to Illness

By Jane Sheppard

I recently had the pleasure of spending a glorious afternoon in a beautiful herb garden with my 4-year-old daughter and one of her friends. The children played happily while I roamed around and took in the lush splendor of the plants. It was an exquisite day, and I marveled that I could feel so relaxed and wonderful just from sitting in the midst of healing plants. I thought about the incredible gifts these plants offer and how vital they are to our existence.

The herbalist I met there passed on to me some of her wisdom and knowledge of the healing properties of herbs, just as women have been doing for centuries. Herbs have been used safely all around the world since ancient times to prevent and treat disease. At last the emerging scientific study of their value is beginning to confirm what herbalists have always known. Now with a strong history of research and clinical use, herbs are being welcomed back into our healthcare system. Training in phytomedicine (herbal medicine) is being introduced in medical schools across the U.S. In France and Germany, doctors and pharmacists have been trained in using herbs for many years and herbal medicine is a core part of their treatments.

Benefits of Herbal Medicine

Herbal medicine can clearly benefit children in many ways. Using herbs to strengthen a child's constitution can make them more resistant to illness. Treating a wide range of childhood problems herbally can be a gentler and sometimes more complete way of healing. Herbs can also give children a true sense of the life-giving wonders of the earth. Now more than ever, children growing up in a toxic world need the ecological equilibrium of herbs. In addition to physical and emotional balance, herbs can assist a child (and the parents) in getting back to Mother Nature and living more in harmony with the earth.

One of the most beneficial uses of herbs is in strengthening the immune system to protect your child against disease. Certain herbs, including echinacea, astragalus, and garlic, have been found to have remarkable immunological effects in both the lab and clinic. These herbs support the body's own process to stay at the peak of vitality and prevent development of disease. Keep in mind that herbs are not "magic bullets" designed to combat a specific disease. Rather than fighting an illness directly, herbs act to strengthen the functioning of the body so that it can repair the problem. We "catch" a cold or flu when conditions in the body are opportune for a virus to take hold. Many of us view illness as an inconvenience to be suppressed or combated as soon as possible. We just want to take a pill to make it go away. But when we can recognize the illness as an indicator that something is out of balance in the body, we can work on building and strengthening the body to function at its best. Herbal medicine is most successful when used in a broader holistic context of addressing the cause of the problem and looking at all aspects of creating health. These aspects include good nutrition, rest, exercise, nurturing, and reducing emotional stress.

This article will focus on immune-building herbs that have been found to be very safe for children. The herbs described here have gentle, yet profound effects upon the body. They are natural sources of vitamins, minerals and other substances that the body uses to nourish and strengthen resistance to illness as well as to create an environment for healing.

Echinacea

With antiviral, antibacterial and other immunological properties, echinacea is well-known for its use in treatment of infections and as a blood purifier. 50 years of research in Europe and more than 400 published studies has established its safety and proven the clinical use of echinacea in boosting immunity and strengthening resistance to infection. A recent review of research concluded that echinacea is well-tolerated and appropriate for long-term use and confirms that it is safe for people of all ages, "from infants to adults". It has been shown to reduce the incidence and duration of colds. There is much controversy as to the effectiveness of echinacea taken over the long term – as to whether or not it continues to work in stimulating immune function. Many herbalists think that echinacea should be used to support the body's natural healing ability just long enough to increase the function of the immune system to work effectively on its own. So echinacea is best used at the first signs of a cold or flu. This is the time to take echinacea often, perhaps even every two hours to stimulate the immune function of fighting the infection. Another good time to use echinacea (two or three times a day) is when you know your child has been exposed to viruses or when their immune function is not at its best. Echinacea can be given to children as a tea or in tincture form. If you are nursing, your child will receive the echinacea you take through your breastmilk.

Astragalus

Astragalus is a tonic herb that boosts immune function and strengthens resistance to disease. It increases the activity of infection-fighting white blood cells and boosts the production of interferon, an antiviral agent. Astragalus is used to prevent colds and flu and to restore immune strength once an illness is over. It is safe for long-term use and can be taken consistently throughout the cold and flu season. Astragalus is considered a warming herb in Chinese medicine suitable only for cold conditions. Depending upon the symptoms, a cold or flu may be considered hot or cold. If you don't know if your child's illness is hot or cold, consult a practitioner of Traditional Chinese Medicine to find out if astragalus should be used. Otherwise don't use this herb during the illness.

Sliced, dried astragalus root looks like a wooden tongue depressor. To make a tea, simmer 6 slices in 3 cups of water for 1 hour. Strain and serve. You can also add the "tongue depressor" directly to your soup, stew, or rice pot and let it cook into the dish. Discard the astragalus before serving. It does not change the taste of the dish and your family can receive the immune boosting properties directly from their food. Astragalus is sometimes available in a dried, shredded form. Simmer 3 tablespoons of this and 3 cups of water in a covered pot for 30 minutes and strain.

Chamomile

Chamomile is one of the safest of medicinal plants. With its antispasmodic, anti-inflammatory, antibacterial, and carminative properties, this tonic herb is used for a variety of things. As a gentle sedative and nerve tonic, chamomile can help children to get the rest they need. A warm bath with an infusion of chamomile can relax an unsettled child. It is a great digestive aid and appetite stimulant. It helps gas, stomach cramps, diarrhea, colic or any other stomach upset. Wounds, diaper rash and other skin problems can be washed with an infusion of chamomile flowers. Chamomile tea is even safe for infants. If you are a nursing mother, drinking a couple cups of chamomile tea each day will calm a fussy, colicky baby (along with your own nerves).

Nettle

Also known as stinging nettles, nettle is one of the most mineral rich plants on earth. Particularly high in calcium, iron, protein, chlorophyll and vitamin C, nettle is a delicious food as well as a medicine.

Nettle strengthens and supports the whole body, and is nourishing, diuretic, tonic, astringent and antihistamine. Clinical studies of nettle (in the form of freeze-dried capsules) show that it relieves the symptoms of hayfever and other allergies. Nettle is also beneficial for childhood eczema. It is an excellent nourishing herb for pregnancy, it can enrich the quality and increase the flow of breastmilk and restore a mother's energy after childbirth. Nettle can be powdered and added to smoothies or drunk regularly as a tea or infusion.

Garlic

Known for centuries as a potent medicine, garlic is one of the most effective anti-microbial plants available. It has antibacterial, antiviral and antifungal activity and works to stimulate the immune system. While eliminating pathogenic organisms, garlic supports the development of the beneficial bacteria flora in the digestive tract. Garlic is a basic food that will enhance the body's health and protect it in general. Garlic oil is very helpful for ear infections. The active constituent of garlic is the sulfur compound allicin, which is produced with crushing or chewing of the fresh garlic. Drying and cooking garlic leads to a loss of a large portion of the allicin. It can be served raw in salad dressing and many other dishes. If your child cannot handle the strong taste of garlic, mince a clove and mix it in with mashed potatoes or your child's favorite-tasting food. Some people may have a sensitivity to garlic. It may cause heartburn or flatulence and of course the odor can be a real drawback.

Combining Herbs with Conventional Medicine

It's easy to incorporate herbal medicine into a child's existing health plan. The question of whether to use herbs or pharmaceuticals does not have to be an either/or issue. A good holistic healthcare plan can combine wise use of herbal medicine with the knowledge of when it may be best to consult a health professional. Keep in mind, though, that herbs contain active ingredients that may interact negatively with pharmaceutical medications. Always inform all of your child's doctors and practitioners about any herbs your child may be using. Unless you have done your own in-depth study of herbs, it's best to stick to nourishing, tonic herbs for strengthening and prevention, and consult a qualified herbalist or other health care professional for treating specific problems.

Herbs and pharmaceutical drugs have very different ways of arriving at the end result. Pharmaceuticals usually suppress an action while herbs work with the body to support or influence balance and create healing on a deeper level. Herbs are more subtle and may take longer to act, but this does not necessarily mean they are less effective than pharmaceuticals. Pharmaceuticals may be faster acting, but using the right herb or combination of herbs at the right dosage can produce as good or even better results than pharmaceuticals, without the harmful side effects.

Many pharmaceuticals are highly toxic. Their potential hazards include kidney failure, permanent liver damage, immune system depression and even death. Most herbs have few, usually mild, side effects that affect a small minority of people. The chance of wasting your money on ineffective, low quality products is greater than experiencing any serious side effects from herbs. However, it is always possible to have an allergic reaction to any new substance, and herbs can be toxic if overused or used improperly. Sometimes herbs will facilitate the body ridding itself of accumulated metabolic waste or toxins. This process can show up in the form of sinus drainage, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, headaches or rashes. Even though this cleansing can be a sign of healing, go slowly and with caution if your child has this experience.

Standardization of Ingredients

Herbs are made up of a complex mixture of chemical ingredients that cannot be duplicated in any lab.

Chemists are now able to isolate the active ingredients of certain herbs and standardize the potency of these constituents, making them, in theory, more powerful medications. This is called standardization. Many herbalists, however, believe that nature has perfectly combined the ingredients in plants for good reason, and the whole herbal compound is safer and more effective, especially for use with children. Since all the different chemical ingredients of a single herb interact and work together, separating any one ingredient may produce an effect that is different than what the whole herb would have on the body. Most of the important ingredients of many herbs have not yet been identified or synthesized in a lab.

Quality of Herbs

The quality of herbs can vary widely. Look for reputable companies that strive for purity and use organic or ethically wildcrafted (harvested from wild plants) herbs. Herbs are under the governance of the FDA, which has mandated a standard of manufacturing called Good Manufacturing Practices (GMPs) on the entire dietary supplement industry. The purpose of these standards is to provide the consumer with safe dietary supplement products. Many companies choose their own standards of manufacturing practices and quality controls that are even more rigorous than those mandated by the FDA. You have every right to call a company and ask about these practices.

Use and Dosages of Herbs

Herbs are available in liquid extracts (tinctures or glycerites), capsules and tablets. You can also buy or make your own teas or infusions from dried or fresh herbs. Tinctures or teas made from dried or fresh herbs work especially well for children. Dosages for children over age one are usually calculated by weight. The dosages listed on bottles or in books are usually designed for a 150 lb. person, so you would need to divide your child's weight by 150 to get the percentage of the recommended dosage. If your child weighs 75 lbs., the dosage would be ½ the dosage listed on the bottle. A child under a year old has an undeveloped and sensitive digestive system, but if they are nursing, they can receive some herbs safely through your breastmilk. You can take the adult dose 15-30 minutes before nursing and the herb will be in your milk for up to 48 hours. Some herbs are not safe for pregnancy or lactation so it's important to avoid them. Medications in Mother's Milk, by Thomas Hale, Ph.D., is an informative book with information on herbs for lactation.

Learning More About Herbs

If you are new to the world of herbal medicine, it can all seem a little overwhelming. Appropriate, discriminate use is essential for safety. Don't believe everything you read about herbs or assume a product is safe just because it is natural. Since there are many different facets to an herb, it is important to know as much as possible before giving it to your child. Embarking on your own study of herbs can be fun, rewarding and empowering. A good way to begin is to consult a qualified herbalist or read several different medicinal herbals (books with information about herbs) that are written by practicing, experienced herbalists. To get a comprehensive view of a certain herb, read about it in at least three different herbals. Using herbs wisely can be a very rewarding experience, especially when you can see positive changes in the health of your children.

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Reference website: <http://hpakids.org/HTML/index.html>