

## **Introduction to Herbal Medicines**

7Song, Free Resources

There are many different types of herbal medicine, and for those new to using herbs, these preparations can be intimidating. Herbal medicine comes in many forms, as there are many

methods for extracting the medicinal properties from plants. These various forms of herbal medicine also allows different ways for the medicines to be taken or applied internally and externally. It is helpful to know the differences between the various types of herbal medicines to find a suitable remedy for an individual and/or a specific condition.

An initial difficulty for many people are the strong flavours of medicinal preparations. One way to make this easier is to dilute them. If they are too unpleasant, there may be other medicinal preparations that are easier to ingest. There are two main factors to take into consideration when using herbal medicine; the frequency (how often) and quantity (how much) to take of each preparation. These differ depending on the strength of the medicine and the health condition being treated as well as the individual taking the medicine. Some medicines (especially for pain and anxiety) may be taken on a regular basis and as needed for symptoms.

## **Herbal Preparations**

### **Glycerites**

Glycerites are plants extracted in vegetable glycerin (a thick sweet substance made from plants). They are used similarly to tinctures and are useful for people who avoid alcohol, as they do not contain any alcohol. Glycerin has a low glycemic index and is safe for diabetics. Due to their sweetness, they are often given to children and others who dislike the flavour of tinctures.

Depending on how they are prepared, they may not be as strong as tinctures, and more may need to be taken. Sometimes glycerin is added to modify tinctures.



Glycerites have a long shelf life. Disadvantages of glycerites include that they poorly extract the medicinal qualities of some plants and may be too thickly sweet for some individuals.

## **Powders**

These are plants ground to a powder. Powders are different from other herbal preparations in that the whole plant is ingested. Powders are easy to take by stirring  $\frac{1}{4}$  to 1 teaspoon into water (or another beverage) and drinking it. While the flavours vary, depending on the plant, some people dislike the texture and/or the taste of these preparations. They can be expensive, though there are some that are inexpensive when purchased in bulk.

When reduced to a powder, many plants lose their medicinal properties quickly and have a shorter shelf life.

## **Capsules**

These are powdered plants put into capsules and are a familiar form of medicine for many people. Capsules are one of the easiest herbal medicines to take. One disadvantage of capsules is that, like powders, they may have a short shelf life. A number of capsules may need to be taken at a time to get their medicinal value. Capsules are one of the most expensive forms of herbal medicine unless preparing your own, which is not difficult, but can be time-consuming.

## **Infused Oils**

Infused oils are plants extracted in a fixed oil such as olive oil. They are very different from essential oils. Infused oils are used for a number of external applications, such as injury, pain, rashes, and inflammation. They are somewhat messy but easy to apply.

## **Salves**

Salves are infused oils with wax added to solidify the preparation. Other herbal ingredients may also be added. They are used for bruises, rashes, infections, lip balms, and other places where the medicine is intended to make prolonged contact with the skin. Keep salves away from direct sun and heat as

they melt easily. Salves should be applied with a clean finger or applicator. They are commonly sold and are easy to use.

## Essential Oils

Essential oils are the concentrated aromatic oils distilled from plants. These are potent preparations and should be used cautiously. They are applied externally either by themselves or put into other herbal preparations such as salves or infused oils. Small amounts are sometimes put into tinctures or glycerites. **Warning:** essential oils should not be taken internally without consulting a knowledgeable practitioner. They have a wide range of beneficial effects and are easily absorbed into the body. They are commonly available but can be expensive.

## Teas

Teas are plants prepared in water and are one of the oldest forms of herbal medicine. They can be inexpensive and easy to prepare. There are a number of ways to make teas, but the most common are to pour hot water on top of the plant (an infusion) or simmer the plant directly in the water (a decoction). Medicinal teas vary greatly in their flavours, and while some people enjoy their flavours, others may find them too strong or unpleasant. They can be diluted or a sweetener can be added to make them more palatable.

It takes equipment and time to prepare teas, making them more difficult for some people. The French press (see picture) is very useful and can increase the medicinal qualities of teas by allowing more of the herbal constituents to be released into the water. It also strains the tea so there are no floating plant pieces. They cost about £15 and plastic ones are less likely to break. When an herbalist recommends tea, they may give very specific instructions on how to prepare the tea as well as how much to take daily. Generally the tea is given in bulk, not in teabags. You may want to avoid tea at night if you wake up to urinate.



## Directions for Preparing Tea

These are approximate directions; the quantity of tea and the simmering time will vary depending on the plants used. Infusion

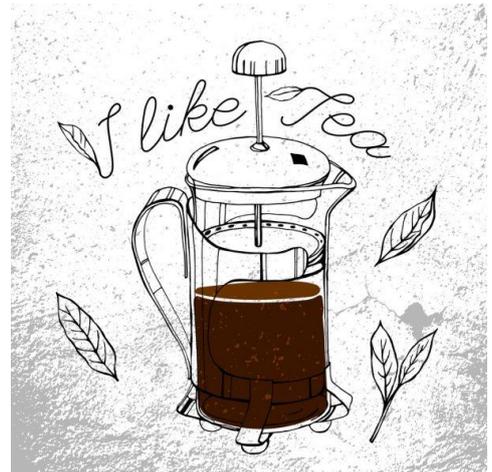
1. Put tea into a jar, or teapot • A useful amount is  $\frac{1}{2}$  to 1 oz of tea per quart of water
2. Pour boiling water on top of the tea
3. Cover and steep for about 10 minutes
4. Strain and refrigerate any leftover tea

## Decoction

1. Bring water to boil
2. Add tea and lightly simmer for about 20 minutes • Approximately  $\frac{1}{2}$  to 1 oz tea per quart of water
3. Strain and refrigerate the leftover tea

## French Press Infusion

1. Add the tea into the French press
2. Pour in boiling water
3. Push plunger part way down so the tea is underneath the hot water
4. Steep for about 10 minutes
5. Push the plunger the rest of the way, squishing the tea on the bottom of the container.
6. Refrigerate any leftover tea



## **External Herbal Medicines**

A number of herbal preparations are applied externally. These interact directly with local skin and tissue and are used for conditions such as rashes, skeletal muscle pain, soreness, and injuries. External medicines can bring direct local relief. Reasons to choose one form over another include ease of application and rate of absorption. Liniments are absorbed the quickest followed by oils and then salves. Compresses and poultices take longer to prepare and can be messy, but can bring quick pain relief and can be anti-inflammatory. Other herbal medicines, such as tinctures, may also be used topically.

### **Compresses**

A compress is a cloth soaked in a strong herbal tea and applied externally. They are simple to prepare and are used for inflammation, injuries, and muscle pain. The compress is left in place until cool and then replaced with a fresh warm compress. Unused tea from a compress can be ingested for its medicinal benefits and can also be stored for later use. One disadvantage of compresses is that they can be difficult to personally apply and assistance may be needed. They also cool quickly and may need to be changed frequently. A hot water bottle can be put on top of the compress to keep it warmer for a longer period of time. Compresses can be wet and messy and it is helpful to have a dry towel underneath your body to absorb any dripping water.

### **Poultices**

Poultices are similar to compresses, but the plant material is cooked in water and applied directly to the body. The heated plant material is either wrapped in cloth or applied directly to the skin. These can be messy and hard to apply to oneself. A hot water bottle can be placed on top of the poultice to keep it warmer. Leftover plant material can be saved for later use and the tea set aside for drinking. The advantage is that they can be prepared as needed in the field by gathering, cooking and applying the plant. Another form of poultice is the spit poultice. This is when a small amount of the plant is chewed and placed directly on the skin, which is commonly done for bee stings and other insect bites.

## Soaks

Soaks are strong teas where a body part is put directly into the tea water. These are often used for infections, injury, and pain, especially for the hands, feet, and ankles. They are easy to prepare (see 'Directions for Preparing Tea' above), but a lot of plant material is needed to make each soak.

## Rubbing Alcohol Liniments

Liniments are plants extracted in rubbing (isopropyl) alcohol and are for external use only. Liniments are used for muscle pain, injury, and stiffness and are helpful for bringing medicines deeper into tissue. They are easy to apply and evaporate quickly. Liniments are a less commonly available herbal medicine.

## Tinctures

Tinctures are plants extracted in (drinking) alcohol. They are one of the most commonly used forms of herbal medicine. Tinctures are popular as they are a convenient, concentrated medicine that is easy to carry and take throughout the day. They are one of the most widely available herbal medicines and have a long shelf life without any special storage requirements. One big disadvantage is that they cannot be used by anyone who avoids consuming alcohol. Let your herbalist know if this pertains to you so they can give you a different herbal preparation. These medicines can be very strong tasting, making them difficult to take. Diluting the medicine in either water or a beverage can be helpful.

## What is a 'Dropperful'?

A number of herbal preparations come in bottles that contain droppers. These can create confusion due to the variability of what is considered a 'dropperful.' Differing amounts of liquid may fill the glass tube when squeezing the rubber top (see picture). This amount also varies depending on the size of the dropper. The dropper size for 1 and 2 oz bottles is about the same, while in a 4 oz bottles the dropper is larger. Drops are also used as a measurement. There are approximately 18 drops in a half filled 1 or 2 oz dropper

