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Herbs and Infections

In attempting to understand disease we naturally look for direct causation, which with infections usually means isolating and then targeting specific disease agents that can be held responsible. This is important so long as we don't forget that germs do not cause disease by accident: their potency depends on the terrain in which they exist, ie. the health and vitality or otherwise of the host organism and its immediate environment.

The major infectious diseases were declining in the Western world, before the introduction of vaccines and antibiotics, thanks to improved public health, cleaner water and better nutrition. They pose no serious threat anywhere that society has organised adequate provision in these spheres. Similarly at the level of the individual, "germs" need reasonably favourable conditions to survive and, whether bacteria, viruses or even fungi, they cannot thrive in the tissues of a healthy body.

We must still cope with a host of infections – almost as a condition of human existence – which it would be foolish to underestimate. Dangerous complications of meningitis, for example, are inevitably going to be treated with conventional antibiotics and these drugs will always have an important place in modern medicine. But they have long been over prescribed for less serious conditions, or where problems are more chronic in nature, and there is widespread abuse of antibiotics in modern agriculture. This has resulted in over exposure and consequent resistance to therapeutic action when that becomes necessary.

Herbal antimicrobials have enormous potential to fill some of the gaps in modern healthcare, including treatment of infections.

Garlic has appreciable antiseptic properties, once being known as "Russian penicillin" and credited with preventing gangrene and sepsis for thousands of troops in the 1914-18 World War. Taken raw it has a cleansing action on the gut, effective in almost all enteric diseases, and disinfects the lungs. Applied locally it is useful too for ear infections, oral thrush and tonsillitis. Many other herbs have local antiseptic action, eg marigold petals and myrrh (gum resin from *Commiphora molmol* and related species), particularly when used in the form of an alcoholic tincture.

Myrrh is a good example of a herbal antimicrobial which, far from leaving us depleted as usually happens with conventional antibiotics, in fact augments and vitalises the body's own defences. It combines direct toxic action on bacteria with the ability to stimulate white blood cell production. Thyme and sage are also known to increase white blood cell activity, certainly in the form of the essential oils. And echinacea, which has been well researched and is readily available, is a potent antibiotic herb that seems to work by enhancing our defence against invasive pathogens.

This enhancement of innate immunity is a crucial advantage with herbal antimicrobials. Herbs can be robustly effective against viral as well as bacterial infections, which may just mean the common cold or a mild flu, but also AIDS and hepatitis B. Somewhat exotic herbs such as astragalus and siberian ginseng probably work this way, strengthening the immune system, and two others with broad spectrum antiviral and antibiotic properties which are perhaps more modest and closer to home: honeysuckle flowers and forsythia seeds.

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